

TOMMY SMITH'S OTHER ANIMALS

EDMUND SELOUS





TOMMY SMITH'S OTHER
ANIMALS

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

TOMMY SMITH'S ANIMALS

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THE RABBITS' GAME

TOMMY SMITH'S OTHER ANIMALS

BY

EDMUND SELOUS

AUTHOR OF "TOMMY SMITH'S ANIMALS"

WITH TWELVE ILLUSTRATIONS BY
AUGUSTA GUEST

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TOMMY SMITH'S OTHER ANIMALS

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

AS you know, when Tommy Smith grew up the animals did not talk to him any more as they used to when he was only a little boy. But he did not grow up all at once, and in the meanwhile he had some more conversations with other creatures which I have not yet told you about. But now I will, because, put together, they will make a little book, about the same size as the last one ; and as there are so many little books in the world, why should not there be just one more ?

It is true that Tommy Smith had promised the owl not to be unkind to animals any more, and the owl had called a meeting, and told the animals all about it, and explained that Tommy Smith was sure to keep his promise, because he made it to him in a particular way, and

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then the animals had given three cheers, and the meeting had broken up, and everybody had gone away in a quite satisfied state of mind. So, as there was no fear now of Tommy Smith's hurting the animals, and as the only reason why the animals had decided to talk to him was to get him out of his bad habits, it seemed as if there was no need of any more conversations. But when conversations have once been begun it is not so easy for them to stop, and it was only natural that creatures who had taken all the trouble to learn the little-boy language should want to speak it to a little boy—and there were some too who, in spite of what the owl had told them, were anxious to get a personal assurance from Tommy Smith himself. Then, of course, those animals who had had their conversation with Tommy Smith had talked about it to the other ones, and what they told them had aroused their curiosity—for you may read in any natural-history book that animals have curiosity strongly developed. This was especially the case with the wilder kinds of creatures, who were not so much accustomed even to seeing little boys, so that the idea of talking to one seemed to them quite extraordinary, and, of course, very interesting.

So on the whole it was not very wonderful that, in spite of the owl's assurances, and there being no more necessity for anything of the sort, yet when Tommy Smith went out walking as usual, he generally found himself having a chat with some animal or another, quite in the old way.

CHAPTER II

THE RABBIT

THE rabbit was the first animal that Tommy Smith met after his chat with the owl that night, when he went to sleep in the middle of talking to him, and I am not sure that it was not the very next day that it happened. In a wood some way from his father's house there was an open space with bracken growing round about it, and when Tommy Smith got there, in the course of his walk, he lay down amongst the cool green fronds, for it was a hot day, so he felt glad of a little rest. But he did not lie long, for almost as soon as he had settled himself, a rabbit started up from the opposite side of the clearing and began to run across it, and Tommy Smith soon saw that he was coming straight towards him. This made him sit up so as to be all ready for a conversation, and he had scarcely got into the proper position when the rabbit was right in front of him, and sitting

up too, all ready to be spoken to, if he should begin the conversation. Tommy Smith thought that perhaps he had better begin it as the rabbit seemed to be waiting. "Well, Bunny," he said, but the rabbit looked as if he thought that a little familiar, so he began again with, "Well, Mr. Rabbit, I suppose you have come over here to see me?"

"I saw you as soon as you got out of the wood," said the rabbit, "and I have come to have a little talk with you. I have heard of your conversations with the other animals, and I thought it would never do if *I* were not represented."

"Represented!" said Tommy Smith. "I suppose you mean if you didn't have a conversation with me too?"

"Yes, that is what I mean," said the rabbit, "only it is rather a poor way of saying it. Just to have a talk is nothing, but to be represented, you know, is important."

"But if it is the same thing——" began Tommy Smith.

"Why then we shall be having an important conversation even if we hardly say anything," said the rabbit; "and it is very nice to know that."

"I think it will depend on what we do say,"

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said Tommy Smith, but the rabbit only stamped with its hind feet—impatiently he thought—and then he remembered what the hare had said about the brains not being on *that* side of the family.

“As for importance,” the rabbit began again, “what *I* say, at any rate, will be all about myself. I have a great deal to tell you, only you seem to be bad at asking questions.” And again the rabbit stamped its feet, and looked more impatient than before.

“Why do you do that, Mr. Rabbit?” said Tommy Smith.

“Now we commence,” said the rabbit, and then added, “That is one of my greatest accomplishments.”

“But why do you do it?” Tommy Smith asked again.

“Oh, there is a very good reason,” answered the rabbit. “You see if there were a lot of us together, and anything at all suspicious were to happen—for instance, if a man were to come, which is always suspicious, you know—the one of us who saw him first would stamp as hard as he could, and we would all be down our burrows in hardly any time.”

“Oh, then it is a signal,” said Tommy Smith.

“Yes,” said the rabbit, “and when any of

us hear it we know just what it means, because it is always the same."

"But why did you do it just now?" asked Tommy Smith, "because you don't seem at all afraid of me, Mr. Rabbit, and there are no other rabbits here."

"Oh, if it comes to that," said the rabbit, "I often stamp when I feel a little impatient or excited. It relieves one's feelings, you know, and besides, there is nothing like practice."

"But," said Tommy Smith, "if you sometimes stamp for one thing and sometimes for another, I don't see how your friends are to know what you mean. They might run to their burrows when there was no danger at all, just because they happened to hear you."

"Well, and why not?" said the rabbit. "After all, there's nothing like being in one's burrow, and even if there was no danger when one went down, one could never tell that there wasn't, sitting at the bottom."

"But you might feel rather foolish when you came up again, and found that it had been a false alarm, Mr. Rabbit," said Tommy Smith.

"Oh, then we should have forgotten all about it," said the rabbit. "We are merry little things, you know, and never think of

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troubling about what is past. We rabbits do not brood."

To Tommy Smith it seemed that the rabbit's signal was not quite such a good one as he thought it was; but as he saw that the rabbit would not agree with him, he thought it best to change the subject, and so he only said, "I suppose your burrow is your house, Mr. Rabbit?"

"I should think it was," said the rabbit. "And a very nice comfortable little house it is too. I only wish you could come down and see it. But of course you are too big."

"I could see the entrance to it if you were to show it me," said Tommy Smith, "and then if I were to bring a spade——"

"A spade!" cried the rabbit, with quite a little jump into the air. "What, to dig my house up under my feet? You wouldn't like me to pull your house down over your head, I suppose?"

"Oh, no," said Tommy Smith, "but——"

"I don't see any 'but' about it," said the rabbit. "It is exactly the same thing, only *I* have a wife and family, which——"

"Oh, do let me see them!" said Tommy Smith, before the rabbit could go on, and he looked so interested, and as if he would never

think of hurting them, that the rabbit said, "Well, perhaps you shall; but you must promise not to think about a spade any more".

So Tommy Smith promised, and as soon as he had, the rabbit cried, "Come along!" and began to run across the open space again, stopping every now and then for Tommy Smith to catch him up, for *he* could not run nearly so fast, and as for walking, that did not seem to suit the rabbit at all. He was in much too great a hurry. As soon as he had got to the other side he made a little dive into the bracken, and then called out, "Here it is," and when Tommy Smith came up, quite out of breath, he found him sitting by the side of as neat a little rabbit hole as he had ever seen. But it was not only he, for there in the very mouth of the burrow, in the shade of a nice large bracken fern that drooped over it, sat another rabbit looking so like him that Tommy Smith would not have known which was which if the one he had been speaking to had not given a little wave with his paw towards the burrow and said immediately, "Allow me to introduce you. This is my wife. You need have no fear, my dear," he added, "for this, you know, is Tommy Smith, the boy who has promised never to hurt an animal."

"As for that," said the new rabbit, "I dare say he couldn't catch me if he tried. I am not afraid for myself, but our little ones are not so wide-awake, and perhaps he might want to take them away and put them in a hutch."

"I would take great care of them——" Tommy Smith was beginning.

"There! I told you so," said the second rabbit; and then the first one looked very grave, and said, "It is not enough not to hurt animals; you ought to be kind to them too. That is what the owl meant, and I am sure if he had thought you were going to put any of us in prison——"

"Prison!" cried Tommy Smith, "oh, no, it would be a proper hutch, made on purpose. A rabbit-hutch, you know."

"You may call a prison a hutch, if you like," said the rabbit, "but that doesn't make it any different. Why, even our burrow, which is more comfortable than anything *you* could make, would be a prison if we could not get out of it."

"I wonder," said the other rabbit, "how any one can be so cruel as to keep a creature that was made to run and jump and be happy all day, in a place too small for it to run and jump in, and where it can't be happy at all.

As for me, I think I would sooner be shot—though that must be very unpleasant—than have to live like some of those poor rabbits that I have sometimes seen hanging up in boxes, against the walls of cottages.”

“But they are tame rabbits, you know,” said Tommy Smith, “so perhaps they don’t mind it so much.”

“Tame or wild,” said the rabbit, “I am sure they would be very glad to be running about in the fields, and as for their not getting water which I am told that they don’t get——”

“But I thought rabbits didn’t drink water,” said Tommy Smith.

At this both the rabbits looked very astonished, and the one that had first made Tommy Smith’s acquaintance said, “Well, I don’t know what dew is if it isn’t water. We drink that at any rate. In the early morning and in the evening, which are the times that we like best to feed in, the grass is all covered with dew, but it is different with a piece of dry cabbage leaf that has lain all night in the kitchen, or been cut after the sun is high. That is the prison diet, I believe, and I have it on the authority of a tame rabbit that escaped. You may ask him what *he* thinks of hutches, if you like.”

"I confess I have strong feelings on this subject," said the lady rabbit, "and without a promise never to keep us in hutches I cannot consent that my little ones——"

"Oh, do let me see them, Mrs. Bunny," cried Tommy Smith, "and I promise never to keep a rabbit shut up in a hutch, whether it is a wild or a tame one."

Both the rabbits looked very pleased at this, and the first one said, "I think you may trust him, my dear, he has lately become a boy of good character".

"Well, if they're not asleep," said the mother rabbit. "But if they are I wouldn't wake them up for anything."

"But do you think they are?" said Tommy Smith, who, of course, did not want them to be.

"It wouldn't be very wonderful, I'm sure," said the mother rabbit, "considering what a nice soft mattress they have to lie upon."

"A mattress!" cried Tommy Smith.

"Yes, indeed," said the mother rabbit, "and one that I make myself, too. If you stoop down and look at my breast, you will see what I make it with."

So Tommy Smith stooped down and looked at the rabbit's breast, and then he saw that a

lot of the fur had been pulled out of it, so that in places it was almost naked. "Oh, Mrs. Rabbit," he cried, "do you really do that to yourself? That *is* good of you."

"As to that," said the father rabbit, "it is just her nature. Things come easy to one when it is one's nature to do them. Do they not, my dear? If it was my nature I would do it at once, and think nothing of it."

"I don't think anything of it either," said the mother rabbit. "What *I* think of is my little ones. *They* are quite enough for me."

"Of course," said the father rabbit. "She would not be a mother if she didn't feel like that. As she is, it's her nature."

Tommy Smith could not help thinking that it was very good of the mother rabbit to pull out her own fur for her young ones to lie on, and he did not quite like the father rabbit's way of explaining it. However, as he did not quite know where it was wrong, and as the mother rabbit seemed to agree with him, he thought it was no use to argue about it, and so he only said, "I *should* like to see your young ones, Mrs. Bunny".

"As soon as they are awake," said the mother rabbit, "they are sure to come and sit

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at the mouth of the burrow—at least, if they feel inclined to. Meanwhile, perhaps you would like to see *us* have a little game.”

“Oh, indeed, I should,” said Tommy Smith, and he had scarcely said so when the two bunnies scampered into the open space, and began to play the funniest little game you can imagine. First they ran in opposite directions, but as soon as there was a little distance between them they turned round and came bounding towards each other, as if neither of them meant to get out of the other’s way. It seemed as if there was going to be a collision; but just at the right moment they both made a jump up into the air and one of them went right over the other. When they came down they were back to back, and there was a little space between them again. But they both turned round directly, and then there was another run and another jump, and so it went on, whilst Tommy Smith sat and watched them and wished he could play at it too. Every time one of the rabbits flew right over the head of the other, and it seemed to Tommy Smith that they took it in turns. “They must do, I think,” he said to himself, “because if not, they would be sure to knock against each other sometimes, but they never do. One always

goes higher than the other, and they must have arranged that between them."

All at once the two little bunnies stopped their play and came running towards Tommy Smith. "How did you like it?" they cried out together. "Isn't it a very nice game?"

"Oh, I should think so!" Tommy Smith answered, clapping his hands. "What do you call it?"

"Oh, we have several names," said the father rabbit. "'The game of jumps' is one."

"Yes, or 'Over and over,'" said the mother rabbit.

"Or 'Excuse my tail,'" said the father one. "That is the best name, I think."

"'Excuse my tail'?" said Tommy Smith. "That is a funny name. I don't understand what that means."

"Why, you see," said the father rabbit, "when we come down after each jump, we are back to back so that each of us has his tail turned to the other. But that is not quite polite, you know, and we turn round so quickly, it is just as if we had thought of it and said, 'Excuse my tail,' both together. We don't say so, of course—it would be too formal, you know—but it looks like that, and so that is

the name I give it. It was I that thought of it."

"'Over and over' is *my* name," said the mother rabbit. "It expresses it just as well *I* think—and it's simpler."

"Simpler, perhaps," said the father rabbit, "but not so refined or elegant. The other is more civilised."

"But we do jump over and over," said the mother rabbit, "and we don't say, 'Excuse my tail'."

"But we think it," said the father rabbit, "or at least we ought to do."

"I never thought of such a thing in my life," said the mother rabbit, "and I don't think you would have done, if it had not been for that tame rabbit who came here with all sorts of funny ideas in his head. He had lived with his wife in a hutch, you know, and when people live in that way they want something silly to amuse them. 'Over and over,' that is my name."

"'Excuse my tail,'" said the father rabbit.

Tommy Smith agreed with the mother rabbit; but he thought it would be best not to say so, as it might hurt the other's feelings. So all he said was, "Well, I think it is a very pretty game, and I think you must lead a very happy

life here together, with your nice burrow amongst the bracken, and a nice space like this to play in."

"Oh, it would be very nice," said the mother rabbit, "if only we were left alone. But we rabbits are persecuted, and that is not nice at all."

"I suppose you have some enemies?" said Tommy Smith.

"Yes," said the mother rabbit, "and the worst one of all is a man. There is a man here, only call him a monster——"

"You may just as well call him a man," said the father rabbit, "for it means the same thing."

"—— who is always shooting us," the mother rabbit continued. "He wears gaiters and a velvetreen coat."

"Oh, but *he* is the gamekeeper," said Tommy Smith.

"I don't see how that makes it any better," said the mother rabbit. "Whoever he is, he ought to be ashamed of himself. A nice thing, indeed, to go about shooting poor little bunnies like us that never did him any harm."

"But, you know," said Tommy Smith—he felt rather uncomfortable saying it, but his father had told him so, and he felt sure it was right—"you know, that you rabbits have to be kept down."

"Kept down!" cried both the rabbits at the same time.

"Yes," said Tommy Smith, "because, you know, if you weren't, there would be too many of you."

"Well," said the father rabbit, "of all the cold-blooded theories!"

"I'm very sorry," said Tommy Smith—and he really felt so—"and of course it must seem very cruel to you. But my father has often told me that if rabbits were not shot regularly they would overrun the whole country."

"Stuff and nonsense!" said the mother rabbit. "Why, I have no more than seven children at the present time, and they are only my second family since the spring. If I have another before the summer is out, it will be as many as I ever do have. It takes me a year very nearly, from the day I am born, to become a grandmother. Overrun the country, indeed!"

"And then," said Tommy Smith—it seemed rather unfriendly to say so, but he felt that he must speak the truth—"don't you do a lot of harm to trees by biting the bark off, all round them?"

"Why, what are we to eat," said the father rabbit, "when the snow is on the ground, and

covers everything up, or when it is a hard frost, so that the ground is like iron? You would think it very hard to have no dinner yourself in the winter, and if we didn't nibble the bark of trees we should have none."

"And even if they must shoot us," said the mother rabbit, "though you will never persuade *me* it is right, they needn't set those horrid traps for us, which break our legs and hold us for days together whilst we die slowly of pain and starvation. How would you like to have two rows of sharp iron teeth biting into your arm or ankle, and holding you tight whilst you lay at the very door of your house, without being able to get into it, however much you tried, and when every time you did try it hurt you horribly? How would you like that?"

"And how would you like to have a great white snake come creeping down the stairs and put his head into the room you were sitting in, and begin to eat your eyes out, whilst you sat there, too frightened to move?" said the father rabbit.

"A white snake!" cried Tommy Smith.

"Yes," said the mother rabbit. "And when at last you did run out of the room and up the stairs, how would you like to find yourself caught in a net at the top, and to be beaten to

death with a stick, or shot, or torn to pieces by dogs? How would you like that?"

Tommy Smith had to confess that he would not like it at all.

"Do you think it right?" said the father rabbit, with a very grave look.

"No, indeed," Tommy Smith answered. "I think things like that are very cruel indeed, and I don't think it can be right to be cruel. I have heard people say that steel traps ought to be made illegal."

"And white snakes?" said the mother rabbit anxiously. "They're even worse."

"I don't think they can be really snakes," said Tommy Smith. "It must be ferrets that you mean."

"They're long enough for snakes, I'm sure," said the father rabbit. "Weasels are long enough in all conscience, and anything longer than a weasel must be a snake."

"They're ferrets," said Tommy Smith. "I've seen them in hutches, and I know a farmer who keeps them."

"Well," said the father rabbit, "I should like to hear you say one thing, and that is that you will never go ferreting."

"No," said Tommy Smith, "I never will."

Both the rabbits looked very pleased at hear-

ing this, and the mother one said, "Ah, what a pleasant life it would be if it were not for men, weasels, white snakes and foxes".

"Foxes!" cried Tommy Smith. "Oh, do tell me something about the fox."

"Don't talk of him," said the father rabbit. "He is really not a fit person to speak about."

"He *is* the cruellest, wickedest creature in the whole world," said the mother rabbit.

"And so cunning," said the father rabbit, "that even *we* are no match for him."

"I should like to have a conversation with him," said Tommy Smith; but the mother rabbit drew herself up very stiffly and said, "Indeed! Then I fear *my* company——" and she at once began springing away to her burrow.

"You have offended her, I fear," said the father rabbit; and then he called out, "Never mind, my dear. Tommy Smith is only a little boy."

"The smallest hint is sufficient," said the mother rabbit, "and hearing about foxes makes me feel anxious for my little ones. However, he may come with me if he likes."

Tommy Smith certainly did like, and running up, what was his delight to see five quite tiny little bunnies sitting close together just outside the burrow.

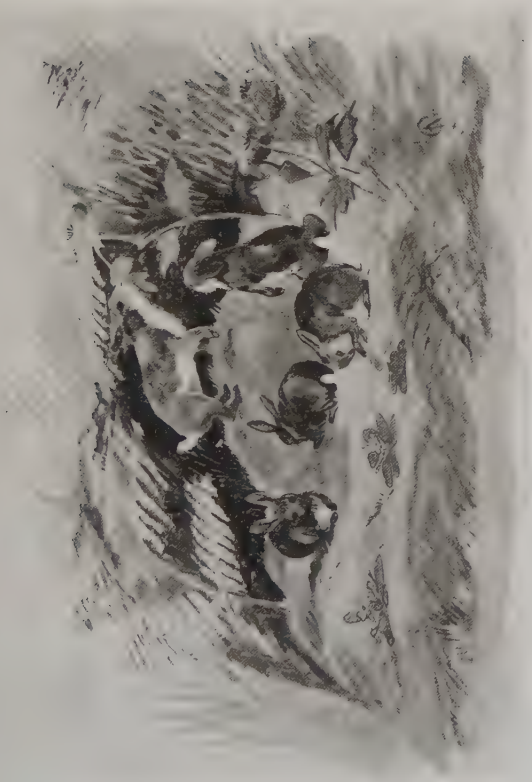
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"What a group they make!" said the mother rabbit. "The rest are inside; but I daresay they will be out soon, and then you can compare each one with all the others, and make up your mind as to which you think the most remarkable."

To Tommy Smith it seemed as if all the little rabbits that were outside were just alike, and he could not help thinking that the ones that were inside were not very different to them. But he thought they all looked very nice, and he longed to have one in his hand. Although they were so small, yet in everything else they seemed quite grown up—not babies at all—and, every now and then, one of them would sit up and begin to clean his face with his paws, just in the same way as his parents.

"Their whiskers are not what they will be," said the mother rabbit, "but such as they are, they know how to look after them. Well, and what do you think of them?" she continued, looking up at Tommy Smith. "You need not say they are pretty if you don't think so. Remarks like that should come from the heart."

"Oh, indeed, I think they are pretty," said Tommy Smith. "They are almost as pretty as——"



"WHAT A GROUP THEY MAKE!"

"Almost?" said the mother rabbit.

"Oh, no, quite," said Tommy Smith, feeling he had made a mistake. "Or even prettier."

"Than what?" said the mother rabbit.

It was kittens that Tommy Smith had been thinking about, and he would have mentioned them if the mother rabbit had not interrupted him. But her doing so gave him time to reflect that kittens change into cats, and that cats are not very friendly to rabbits, and then he thought he had better say nothing about them. So instead, when the mother rabbit said, "Than what?" he answered, "Than anything I have ever seen," and then asked if he might stroke the young rabbits.

"If they will let you," said the mother rabbit. "My plan is to allow my children to do as they please. I do not believe in constraining them."

"Self-development is our maxim," said the father rabbit.

But Tommy Smith did not hear him, or even the last remark of the mother rabbit, for he had gone down on his hands and knees, and was crawling towards the little rabbits, who continued to sit quite still on the edge of the burrow, and did not seem to see him. At last he got

quite near and was just stretching out his hand to take hold of the nearest one, when all at once there was a jump and a scamper, and all the little rabbits had disappeared down the hole.

"You can't go after them, you know," said the father rabbit, "because you are too big."

"And besides, if they were to go to sleep again now, after such violent exercise you would be sure to wake them up," said the mother rabbit.

"What am I to do?" asked Tommy Smith, in rather a melancholy voice, for he had made sure of getting one of the little rabbits, and felt quite disappointed.

"Well," said the father rabbit, "you may sit down quietly just where you are now, and wait till they come out."

"And when they do?" said Tommy Smith.

"Why, then," said the mother rabbit, "you may try again."

But Tommy Smith thought that he might have to wait a long time ; so he said good-bye to the rabbits, and set off home through the woods,

CHAPTER III

THE NIGHTJAR

THE woods were so pretty in the early summertime of the year that Tommy Smith loitered a little on his way back, and as he got near where the wood ended, it was getting towards evening—and a very beautiful evening it was, the birds were singing sweetly in the trees, and the air was like a golden mist in the setting sun. All at once one of the most extraordinary noises that can possibly be imagined seemed to fill the whole wood. If it had been like anything perhaps it would have been like a pair of castanets, only it had a rolling sound in it as well, and it rose and fell, and went on for such a long time that the air was all in a tremble with it, and it seemed as if it would never leave off. Tommy Smith looked here and there to try and find out where the sound came from, but it seemed to be everywhere, and he could not imagine where the animal was that was making it; for he knew it must be

an animal of some sort though he could not think of any whose cry he did not know that seemed half big enough to make it. All at once the wonderful noise stopped, there was silence for a few seconds, then it began again, and just as it did Tommy Smith saw a rather funny-looking bird perched on the very tip-top of a small fir-tree that was only just a little way off. The bird was not so very much larger than a blackbird, but it had a large head and a very large mouth, and its wings looked very long. As for colouring, it was brown, like a hen blackbird too, but all mottled, and with a very dusky look—as if it had more to do with the night than the day, Tommy Smith thought—and altogether it seemed to him to be a very funny bird indeed.

As long as Tommy Smith had seen nothing the noise had seemed to come from everywhere ; but now he felt sure that it was coming from that tree, and that it was the bird perched on the top of it that was making it. All at once it left off again, and at the very same instant the funny bird flew off the tree, and where should it fly to, but right down to where Tommy Smith was standing. As it went through the air, it clapped its wings together several times above its back, and each time there was a

sound as if some one had clapped their hands lightly and yet smartly, only it was a prettier and much more musical sound. Then it was all quiet, and there was the funny bird lying crouched on the ground, almost at Tommy Smith's feet, and looking up at him with two very large black eyes.

"Oh," said Tommy Smith, as soon as he could speak for surprise. "Why, whatever bird are you? I don't think I have ever seen you before."

"Perhaps not," said the funny bird, "because I do not come out much before evening, and it is not often that you are here at that time. I am a night-flier like the owl, and I do not often go very far from this wood. Why should I? I can find all the food I want, either in it or round about it, and it contains a beautiful beech-tree, not very far off, under which my wife always lays her eggs. We do not believe in a fresh home each spring. We prefer to come back to the old one after passing our winter in Africa. We are migratory birds, you know."

"But what bird are you?" asked Tommy Smith.

"Oh, I have several names," the funny bird answered. "Some people call me the goat-sucker, but that is quite a mistake, - I have

nothing to do with goats, and I drink water, not milk. Then others will have it that I am an owl, but, dear me, I should be sorry not to fly better than *he* does. He may be very wise but I could give him lessons in flying any day, or rather any night, for as I said before I am a night-flier. Then again, I never heard of any owl that could clap his wings above his back in the way that I do. You may correct me if I am wrong, but I believe that owls have no accomplishment of that sort."

"The owl that talked to me never did it," said Tommy Smith, "and I never heard him say that he could."

"I should think not," said the funny bird. "He may pretend to know a lot of things, and perhaps he does; but he can't pretend to know that. No, no, he may be clever—I don't say he isn't—but he is not what one calls gifted."

"Gifted?" said Tommy Smith. It was a word he did not quite understand. He had not heard it used in his family.

"Yes," said the funny bird. "He cannot clap his wings above his back or make a noise like a wheel going round in his throat. Things like that are gifts, but as for most other things mere talent will achieve them. There is a difference, I hope, and that is why I very much

dislike being called the churn-owl or fern-owl. No, I am not an owl, and I beg you will not call me so."

"But what shall I call you?" asked Tommy Smith.

"Call me the nightjar," said the funny bird. "That is the name I like best."

"Well, then, Mr. Nightjar," said Tommy Smith, "I wish you would tell me how you make that wonderful noise."

"Why, I hardly know myself," said the nightjar. "It comes to me; that is all I can be sure about. But if you like you shall see me do it."

And all at once the air began to vibrate and quiver with the sound again, and it seemed to Tommy Smith that the leaves of all the trees were trembling with it, as if the whole wood and everything else had somehow got inside a great workshop where a hundred wheels and cylinders, and all sorts of other things, were whirring and spinning round by machinery.

All at once the noise stopped. "There!" said the nightjar, "that is the greatest of the gifts which I possess, and this one comes next to it," and as he said this he suddenly rose from the ground, light as a feather, and began to circle about amongst the trees, clapping his

wings all the time. Then all at once he was back again, and looking up at Tommy Smith with his black eyes as much as to say, "There! I think it is your turn to clap now, after such a performance as that."

"Well," he said, "and how do you think I do it?"

"Oh, beautifully, Mr. Nightjar," Tommy Smith answered. "You are the only bird I have ever seen that can clap its wings like that."

"Oh, the woodpigeon can a little," said the nightjar. "Not like me, of course, but his efforts are sometimes creditable. I can afford to admit that—there is no question of rivalry. Well, and how many times did I clap them?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Tommy Smith, "they were so quick just at first that I lost count, but it was more than thirty times at the very least."

"You don't say so," exclaimed the nightjar. "Well, I am glad to know it. I could not have told you that myself now. I can produce the thing, but I am not able to measure it. Others can do that better than I."

"Isn't that rather funny, Mr. Nightjar?" said Tommy Smith.

"Not at all," answered the nightjar. "It is always so when you come to the higher powers."

Tommy Smith did not quite understand what the nightjar meant by this; but it was easy to see that he thought a good deal of himself. "But what do you clap your wings for, Mr. Nightjar?" he asked, "and why do you go on making that noise in your throat for such a very long time?"

"As for that," said the nightjar, "when a thing is *in* one, it has to come out of one. It would be wicked, in my opinion, not to exercise one's gifts, and besides, we nightjars are sociable birds, and when we sit in our trees at an evening, we like to know that others are near us. So first one of us churrs, as we call it, and then another, and that makes it quite merry and comfortable. We can't see each other amongst the leaves, of course, but we can hear each other, as you may imagine."

"Yes, indeed," said Tommy Smith.

"And so it goes on," the nightjar continued, "first one and then another, and sometimes several together, like a conversation, and, in fact, it is a sort of one. Oh, there is nothing nicer than to sit and churr in the trees, on fine summer evenings, just before it is time to fly. Then when we do fly we can clap our wings, and we like hearing each other do that, too. We know that there are nightjars all about

then, and it makes us feel that the world has not been made quite in vain. You see we are all happy, that is the great thing. So now I hope you understand."

"Yes, I think I understand," said Tommy Smith, "and I think it must be very nice too. And what do you feed on, Mr. Nightjar?" he asked, for he knew nothing, as yet, of the habits of the bird he was talking to.

"Insects," the nightjar answered, "which makes us one of the most useful birds that can be found anywhere. In fact if you ask me I don't think there is a more useful bird, but perhaps *I* may be prejudiced."

Tommy Smith was just beginning to say that the peewit must be *as* useful at any rate, but he remembered what the nightjar had just said, and altered the sentence into "Insects? Then I suppose, Mr. Nightjar, you catch them all in the air, as you seem to be such a good flier."

"I should think I did," said the nightjar. "A good flier? Yes, you may say that. There are very few insects that can get out of *my* way when I fly after them. I can turn and twist about and move several ways at once almost, like——"

"Like a swallow?" said Tommy Smith, seeing that the nightjar hesitated.

"No," said the nightjar—in rather a funny tone, Tommy Smith thought,—“not like a swallow ; like a nightjar.”

“Oh, but really the swallow——” Tommy Smith was beginning.

“The swallow,” said the nightjar — and Tommy Smith felt that he had made a mistake—“the swallow is a very good flier. I have always said so. He is a very good flier indeed. So is the swift ; *he* flies better still.”

“He keeps in the air longer,” said Tommy Smith, “and perhaps he flies faster, but——”

“He is the better of the two,” said the nightjar decisively. It was plain that he thought himself a judge. “In my opinion,” he continued—and Tommy Smith could not help thinking there was something a little supercilious in his tone—“in my opinion he is the second best flier in this country.”

“But then who is the first?” asked Tommy Smith.

“It is not for *me* to say,” the nightjar answered. “However, if you are having a conversation with the swift or the swallow, one of these days, and want to pay them a compliment, you can tell them that they fly like a nightjar. It would not be *quite* true, of course, but then compliments never are.”

It was quite evident to Tommy Smith that the nightjar thought himself the best flier in England. He had not quite said so, indeed, but that, he felt sure, was what he meant. "Well," he thought, "he *has* a good opinion of himself, but, after all, he does fly very well, and I have not seen him chasing insects yet, as I have the swift and the swallow. Oh, Mr. Nightjar," he cried all at once—and he wondered he had not thought of it before—"do let me see you catch an insect."

"With pleasure," said the nightjar, "let me see—is everything ready?" and before Tommy Smith had time to ask what he meant, the nightjar opened one of the largest mouths that he had ever seen in any animal, quite the largest, perhaps, except the frog's. Indeed it was so large that he seemed as if he had opened his whole head, so that Tommy Smith was quite shocked at first and thought there must be something wrong about it.

"Oh, Mr. Nightjar," he cried, "haven't you hurt yourself?"

"I don't quite understand you," said the nightjar, as he shut his mouth again. "Well, as everything is in order—do you see that tree?"

"Yes, I think I do," said Tommy Smith,

though he did not feel at all sure as to what tree the nightjar was looking at.

"Well," said the nightjar, "there are some cockchafers flying round the top of it, and if you wait here a minute, I will catch one and bring it back to you." And as he said this he rose from the ground, as lightly as he had before, and flew to a fine tall elm that stood a little by itself not very far from where they were. When he got there he began to circle about the top branches, and Tommy Smith could see him making all sorts of turns and twists in the air as if he was chasing something, though he could not make out what it was very well, as the tree was so high.

"But he seems to take a long time catching it," he thought to himself. "Oh, there! I think he must have got it now," for the nightjar had made quite a wonderful movement, plunging down, and then stopping suddenly, and going up again almost perpendicularly.

"He must have got it now," said Tommy Smith again, and sure enough, directly after this last little whirligig, the nightjar came flying back again, and this time he settled on the branch of a tree just above Tommy Smith's head, and Tommy Smith noticed that he sat on it lengthways with his head held down, lying along it, as it were, instead of in the

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ordinary way that a bird perches. "There," he said, and as Tommy Smith looked up he saw that he had a cockchafer in his bill.

"Yes, I see you have got him," said Tommy Smith; "but you were rather a long time about it; he must have given you a good deal of trouble, I think."

Before making any answer, the nightjar first swallowed the cockchafer, then he sat still for a while and his large mouth just opened a little—at the corners especially—until it seemed to Tommy Smith that he was smiling; then he shut one of his great black eyes, the one nearest to Tommy Smith, and said quietly, "Well, and how many do you think I got?"

"How many?" said Tommy Smith. "Why, I only saw one in your beak."

"One at a time," said the nightjar. "I didn't catch them altogether, of course."

"Then have you been eating them in the air?" said Tommy Smith.

"You needn't wonder at that," said the nightjar. "There are not many things that *I* can't do in the air, and eating cockchafers is easy."

"I thought you just went to catch one and come back with it," said Tommy Smith, "and I thought I saw you chasing it all the time. Then how many did you catch, Mr. Nightjar?"

"Why, really I think I've forgotten," said the nightjar; "but perhaps you can tell me how many twists in the air I made?"

"I'm afraid I can't," said Tommy Smith, "you made so many, you know."

"Well," said the nightjar, "*I* can tell *you* this, that at every twist I made, I caught a cockchafer—yes, and ate him too—and I caught a few others without making a twist at all. I really can't remember how many it was, but they were all of them very nice. Dear me! and did you really think that I was all that time chasing one cockchafer?" And again the nightjar's mouth opened a little at the corners, and again he shut the eye that was nearest to Tommy Smith.

"It was very clever of you, Mr. Nightjar," said Tommy Smith, "and I think it's quite wonderful the way you fly."

"Fly!" said the nightjar. "You haven't seen me fly yet."

"Oh, I think I have, Mr. Nightjar," said Tommy Smith, for he thought the bird was joking. "But perhaps," he added, "you know some more tricks, besides the ones you have shown me."

"Oh, yes," said the nightjar, "I am gifted in other ways as well. One *extremely* clever

device of mine—however, my wife can show you that better than I can just at present, as she is in the right state of mind for it. A thing, you know, is always better when it comes from the heart.”

“Oh, yes,” said Tommy Smith, for he had often heard his mother say this.

“Come along, then,” said the nightjar, and rising from the branch where he had been sitting, he skimmed lightly along a few yards in front of Tommy Smith, who followed him of course, wondering very much what was going to happen. The trees got thinner as they went on, and at last they came to where the wood ended by the side of an open heath. Just on the edge there was a fine old beech-tree with spreading branches, and as the nightjar flew under it Tommy Smith lost sight of him. When he came to the beech-tree himself, he began to look about. “I daresay he is on one of the branches,” he said to himself, “or perhaps on the ground. No, he is not there. I should see him if he was, because it is quite bare, and—Oh,” he cried, all of a sudden, “whatever is that?” and he made a run at something that did certainly seem to be made like a bird, and was even about the right size and colour for a nightjar, but which

kept spinning and buzzing over the ground, and turning round and round on it, in a way that much more resembled an insect than a bird. "But it can't be an insect," thought Tommy Smith, "because it is ever so much too big, and—and—Oh, I do believe it is the nightjar after all," he said, and then he called out, "Oh, Mr. Nightjar, whatever are you doing? I think there must be something the matter with you."

But the nightjar—if it *was* he—did not answer, but continued to spin about in the same extraordinary way, and as Tommy Smith tried to get up to him—for he thought he really must be ill, and wanted help—he went faster and faster, till at last he got away from the beech-tree altogether, and began to buzz and spin over the heath. Then, all at once, when he was a good way off, he rose into the air and came flying back to the beech-tree again, and settled just beside a dead bough that lay on the ground near its trunk. Of course Tommy Smith walked up to the bough, but though he looked first on one side of it, and then the other, and then all about it, he could see nothing. "Wherever *can* he be," he said to himself. "I saw him go down here quite plainly."

"Here I am," said a voice, which seemed to come from the bough itself. Tommy Smith stooped down quickly, and put out his hand.

"Don't hurt me," said the voice, "be very careful," and then Tommy Smith's hand touched some feathers, and he saw that what he had thought was a part of the branch was a nightjar.

"Oh," he said, very much surprised. "Is that really you, Mr. Nightjar? I saw you all the time, but I thought——"

"Yes," said the voice, "it is really I; but I am not the bird you have been talking to. I am his wife, you know, so you must not call *me* Mr. Nightjar."

"Oh, I remember now," said Tommy Smith. "You were to show me a trick; but I think you have shown me two, and this one is almost the most curious. Why, you looked just like a piece of dry bark or stick."

"That is because we harmonise with our surroundings," said the male nightjar, as he flew down from the beech-tree, where he had been all the time, and settled beside his wife. "If you had not seen me each time as I flew up to you, you would have thought me something of the sort, too, as long as I sat quietly. Would he not, my dear?"

As he said this, the male nightjar turned to his partner, and churred quietly, and *she* turned to *him* and churred quietly, too, just as though she agreed with him. It was quite a soft little sound now—as soft a one almost as Tommy Smith had ever heard—and as the two birds sat making it together, they both of them kept wagging their tails from side to side, just in the way that a dog wags his tail—it was as pretty a sight as you could see.

“Oh, then, you can churr too, Mrs. Nightjar,” said Tommy Smith. “I think I have read in a natural-history book that only the cock bird made that noise”—for he remembered reading about the nightjar now.

“Indeed?” said the hen nightjar. “What do *you* say, my dear?”

“I should be very sorry if you couldn’t, my love,” her husband answered, and then there was more churring and more wagging of tails. “But come, dear,” he continued, “let us show Tommy Smith our family. That will be a little better for him than reading about us in books.”

As he said this he moved a little away from his wife, and she moved too, in the opposite direction, and there, between them, were two of the funniest-looking little creatures, something like young chickens, but covered with

whitey-grey fluff, which made them look still more like powder-puffs. They lay quite still and seemed to press themselves into the ground, whilst Tommy Smith knelt over them and looked at them with the greatest delight.

"Oh, what funny little things!" he said.

"Is that all you think of them?" said the mother nightjar.

"Of course they are pretty, too," said Tommy Smith, though he felt rather doubtful about it, "at least in a way."

"A way, indeed!" said the mother nightjar, "there are twenty at the very least, and, if you like, I will explain them to you."

"Oh, thank you," said Tommy Smith, "but first, Mrs. Nightjar, will you tell me what you meant by going on in that funny way, when I came by here just before?"

"Why, it was time to do something, I think," said the mother nightjar. "I sat close as long as I could, which is what I always like to do; but when it comes to being stepped upon it is time to act. I *had* to leave my little ones then, for there would be no use in our all being killed together. So I went off in the way you saw and instead of thinking about my children, you ran after me. If it had not been for that I daresay you would have noticed them, for their

beauty makes them very conspicuous. But I made myself more conspicuous still."

"She is so devoted," said the father nightjar.
"But I wouldn't have hurt them," said Tommy Smith.

"You would if you had stepped on them," said the mother nightjar, "and besides I am so highly strung."

"She has the artistic temperament," said the father nightjar. "In fact we both have. But had we not better feed them, my dear?" he continued, "they seem to be getting hungry." For whilst they were talking, the two little chicks had moved a little from their places, and now they were jumping up to their father's and mother's bills, one to one and the other to the other.

"Well," said the mother nightjar, "I suppose we had better," and, as she spoke, she bent down her head and opened her bill, into which the little one put his, and then it was very evident that she was bringing something up into its mouth, for she moved her head and, indeed, her whole body in a very funny way; and it was just as easy to see that the little one was making a meal and enjoying it very much indeed. The father nightjar did the same with the other little chick, and when it was over

they both looked at Tommy Smith, as if they expected him to say something. But Tommy Smith was too surprised to say anything.

"There!" said the father nightjar, "that is how we feed our young ones. It is a pretty scene, is it not?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Nightjar, but how have you done it?" said Tommy Smith. "I didn't see any insects in your bills."

"No," said the mother nightjar, "because we swallow them first, and then, when our children require them, they are nice and soft."

"They undergo a process inside us," said the father nightjar. "Solid food is not good for infants."

"Why, you are like the woodpigeons," said Tommy Smith. "They feed their young just in that way."

"We have our imitators, of course," said the mother nightjar, "and that shows what a good plan ours is."

"If it were not," said the father nightjar, "it would not have been adopted by several very sensible birds."

To Tommy Smith it did not seem any more likely that the woodpigeons had imitated the nightjars than that the nightjars had imitated the woodpigeons, and as he was fond of the



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woodpigeon, he was just going to say so, when all at once it occurred to him that it was getting quite dusk and he would be very late for his supper—perhaps, even, his father and mother might be angry.

Of course under those circumstances he could not stay any longer, so he just explained things to the nightjars, and was beginning to run home.

"Wait a minute," said the father nightjar. "Of course it is unnecessary to ask you, but perhaps you might get some other people to promise never to kill a nightjar—a bird that eats nothing but insects, and does no sort of harm whatever."

"And feeds its young in a civilised manner," added the mother nightjar.

"To be sure," said the father nightjar, "and is very gifted in all sorts of ways, as well."

Of course Tommy Smith said he would try, and the two nightjars were so pleased that, as he ran back across the heath, they flew round him in circles and sported with each other, and played so many antics and tricks in the air that he began to think that what the first one had said to him a little while ago was true, for it seemed as if he had not seen him *really* fly till now.

CHAPTER IV

THE WEASEL

“WELL,” thought Tommy Smith to himself one morning, as he was walking in one of the lanes near his house, “I wonder who the next animal will be to have a conversation with me. It will have to be some bird, I think, because I have seen most of the other animals. Let me see. I have had conversations with the rat, the hare, the rabbit, the mole, the grass-snake, the——”

“But not with me,” said a little squeaky voice from the hedge. “The least important ones have come first, it seems; but perhaps that is not so unusual. You know there is a saying, ‘last, but not least’.”

“Where are you?” said Tommy Smith. “I hear where your voice comes from, but I can’t see you at all. And yet you ought to be rather big, to talk in that way.”

As he said this, something like a red streak shot down the bank of the hedge, and through

the ditch at the bottom, and the next moment an animal that was not at all big, but very curious to look at, was sitting upon the edge of the road, and looking at Tommy Smith with a very pert expression. It had red fur on all the upper parts of its body, and white on the under ones, and its body was so long in proportion to the height of its legs that it looked almost like a kind of snake. Tommy Smith had seen this little animal before, so he knew at once that it was a weasel.

"Big!" said the weasel. "I am ten inches long and not afraid of anybody. That is big enough, I think, in a world like this. I suppose you know who I am. Even if you have not seen me, you will have heard me talked about."

"I have seen you," said Tommy Smith, "and that is why I know who you are. But are you so very much talked about?"

"My exploits are pretty well known, I think," said the weasel; "but if you haven't heard of them that is all the better, because then I shall have more to tell you."

Tommy Smith thought a little, and then he said, "I don't know that I have heard so very much good about you, Mr. Weasel".

"What, not about my sucking eggs?" said

the weasel. "I suppose you would call *that* good. Any one would, I should think."

"As to that," said Tommy Smith, "it depends on what eggs you suck."

"Oh, do you think so?" said the weasel. "In my opinion they are all good."

"I mean whose they are," said Tommy Smith. "Hen's eggs, you know, are private property, and so are pheasant's and partridge's."

"That does not affect the flavour in the least," said the weasel. "They are all very good, I assure you."

It seemed to Tommy Smith that the weasel had not quite understood what he meant, so he thought he would try and explain it better. "It's all very well, Mr. Weasel," he began, "but when things belong to other people, one oughtn't to take them."

"Indeed!" said the weasel.

"Not without permission," Tommy Smith answered.

"Whose permission?" said the weasel.

"Why, the owner's, of course," said Tommy Smith.

"Indeed!" said the weasel. "Ah, then, *you* don't suck eggs, I suppose."

"I eat them," said Tommy Smith. "Hen's eggs, at least," he added.

"Indeed!" said the weasel again. "And do you get the hen's permission?"

Tommy Smith remembered that this was just the way in which the rat and the squirrel had argued. It had puzzled him rather then, but he had had plenty of time since to think it over, and now he thought he could put it quite clearly, so as to make the weasel see that he was wrong.

"You see, Mr. Weasel," he began, "the hens that lay the eggs are mine—that is to say they are my father's—so that makes *him*, and not the hen, the owner of the eggs, and, of course, I have his permission."

The weasel had crossed its paws over its nose whilst Tommy Smith was explaining, and seemed to be listening very attentively. But now he took them off and lifted them into the air, as though in astonishment—it even seemed to Tommy Smith that he was laughing.

"*What!*" he cried. "So a hen is not the owner of her own eggs? Well, of all the ridiculous things I *ever* heard. Why, you might just as well say that her feathers were not her own feathers."

"Perhaps they're her own till they're plucked," Tommy Smith was beginning—he felt rather doubtful about it.

"And till they're *sucked*," said the weasel, "eggs belong to the birds that laid them. After that they don't, so what does it matter who sucks them? It's all the same to the bird you know. That's *my* doctrine."

"But——" said Tommy Smith.

"Oh, don't let's have any more nonsense," said the weasel. "*We* understand each other, and I don't pretend to be better than my neighbours. Well, so we both suck eggs; but do you kill the birds too?"

"No, I do *not*," said Tommy Smith indignantly; "and as for sucking eggs——"

"Oh, that's settled now," said the weasel, "we won't go back again. So you don't kill the birds? That's a pity. They're nicer than the eggs, *I* think."

"If *you* kill them——" said Tommy Smith angrily.

"*If!*" said the weasel. "Listen, and I will tell you one of my exploits. You know the bird-catcher, I suppose, with his nets and cages?"

"Yes," said Tommy Smith, "I know him, but I don't like him."

"Ah, then, you just listen," said the weasel, "you shall hear how I served him out. I came upon one of his cages once, as it was set

in a field, and found it full of nice little song-birds—so pretty some of them were. The first thing to do, of course, was to get in, but how was I to manage that, for the bars of the cage were set too closely, even for me? But a weasel is not easily daunted, and I soon found a little round hole for the birds to put their heads through and drink water out of a little pan outside the cage. Well, I was through that in a moment, and there were the birds all round me without a chance of getting away. It was really delightful—the most charming ten minutes or so that I ever had in my life. I killed every one of them, of course, and then——”

“Oh, you wicked little creature!” Tommy Smith exclaimed.

“Don’t interrupt me,” said the weasel. “And then I lay down in a corner of the cage amongst all their beautiful soft warm bodies—the most comfortable feather-bed they made that I have ever lain on.”

“Well, of all the——” Tommy Smith was beginning.

“Oh, do let me finish,” said the weasel. “Where was I? Oh, the feather-bed, yes. And there, after a time, I went to sleep. But there’s no catching *me* like that, you know, and

so, when the bird-catcher came up, I was all wide-awake in a moment, and through that little hole again, or another one like it—for I think there were several—in less than no time. Ah, you should have heard the bird-catcher *then*, if you don't like bird-catchers. It would have done you good, I feel sure—it did me. I was in the hedge, close by, you know, and could listen to it quite comfortably. Well, and what do you think of *that* for an exploit?"

Tommy Smith was almost too angry to speak—which shows what a different boy he had become from what he used to be. "As for the bird-catcher," he said at last, "I am not at all sorry for *him*. But you are a great deal worse, and of all the cruel, wicked little animals——"

"Oh, dear," said the weasel, "you mustn't be prejudiced. I don't think it's wicked to eat one's dinner, and then I am very useful."

"Useful?" said Tommy Smith. "I don't see how, if you kill song-birds."

"We'll come to that presently," said the weasel; "but first I want to get on with my exploits. I've only told you one yet, and that was not the greatest."

"I should hope not," said Tommy Smith,

"killing a lot of poor song-birds, indeed! It's very——" But as the weasel only looked impatient, and as Tommy Smith did not think he should be able to improve him, he thought he might as well give up trying, and so only said, "Well, and what was your greatest exploit, Mr. Weasel?"

"You shall hear," said the weasel. "Once as I was following the trail of a rabbit across some open ground I noticed a large bird hovering high in the air right above me. I saw at once that it was a bird of prey, but I did not feel uneasy—a weasel never does—and I thought it highly improbable that it would interfere with *me*. Well, so I just trotted along, but all at once there was a rushing sound in my ears, a dark shadow seemed to descend upon me, and the next moment a lot of hard iron rings were fastened round my body and up I went into the air."

"I suppose the iron rings were the bird's claws," said Tommy Smith.

"Yes," said the weasel, "and I suppose they ought to have run into me, but somehow they didn't, or not very much. I am so small, you see, and elegantly made that they went round me quite comfortably, and only pinched me in a little underneath."

"And what did you do?" said Tommy Smith.

"Well," said the weasel, "I just flew for a little, without troubling much. The sensation was new to me, and I found it quite pleasant."

"Flew, indeed!" said Tommy Smith. "You mean you were carried."

"It seemed like flying," said the weasel, "and as I say it was quite pleasant at first. After a time, however, I began to get a little uncomfortable. Those iron rings that I spoke of were pressing me a little too tightly. So I wriggled and wriggled till at last I began to slip through them—a weasel, you know, can slip through anything. The eagle—there is something grand, I think, in being carried off by an eagle——"

"The eagle!" exclaimed Tommy Smith, in great surprise.

"Had luckily seized me a little too far back," the weasel continued.

"I don't believe it was one," said Tommy Smith. "It was just a hawk."

The weasel gave a little gesture of impatience, and said angrily, "Is it I who am telling the story, or you?"

"Oh, you," said Tommy Smith, and he

added, speaking to himself, "I am sure he *is* telling a story."

"Well, then," said the weasel, "don't interrupt me. Remember that this is my greatest exploit, and you wouldn't like to be interrupted in telling your own. The eagle, as I say, had seized me rather far back, so that most of the upper part of my body was free. I twisted that round its leg like a snake, and then, all at once, gave a tremendous bite with my sharp teeth. The eagle started, you may be sure—most creatures do start when *I* bite them—he gave a great writhe in the air, his claws—those great iron rings of his—became a little relaxed, and I managed to pull my body through them. Then I bit again, but I was not high enough up yet. It was all skin and bone, and I could hardly get the taste of blood. So I went higher, burrowing amongst the feathers, till I was right under one of the great wings where the arteries are. Ah! that was the place. Oh, how I bit and tore! and how the warm blood came pouring all over me! It was most delightful to taste it again. In the air above me there was scream upon scream. Such cries! So wild and so fierce! But what did I care? I only went on tearing and biting and drinking the warm sweet blood. But

now there were such peculiar motions that I began to get quite giddy. Round and round I went, and sometimes there was a great plunging sweep, with another sweep up at the end of it, and then round and round again. We were getting lower, but I did not know it, for my head was buried amongst the feathers, and I was still drinking the blood—I felt giddy, but I went on drinking it. All at once there was a sort of a jerk, and then there were no more sweeps and plunges, no more whirlings round and round. There were other movements though, which I knew much better, more like those that a rabbit makes when my teeth are at the back of his neck. Ha, ha! I liked that better. That did not make me giddy, and I went on sucking the blood more and more. All at once I felt myself sinking again, but only just a very little; then there was a trembling and quivering, and after that everything was still. I was touching the ground now and I had had all the blood I wanted. I ran out, and there was an eagle lying dead. I—the weasel—had killed him. That was an exploit, I think.”

Tommy Smith felt quite sure that it was really only a hawk that the weasel had killed, but he thought there would be no use saying so

again, as he could not prove it, and it would be sure to make the weasel angry. So he only said, "And weren't you hurt at all, Mr. Weasel?"

"Not in the least," said the weasel, "and it was just the same when an owl carried me off. That was by night, of course. A fine ride I had above the old church-tower, in the moon-light. It was the throat I got at that time. That was better still."

"Did you slip through the owl's claws, too, Mr. Weasel?" asked Tommy Smith.

"It was not done in quite the same way," answered the weasel. "I gave him a bite on the leg, and when he bent down his beak to bite me, I got him by the throat, as I say, and never let go—I never do, you know. *He* had to though. I felt his claws loosening, and, as for his beak, he wanted that to scream with, whilst I went on drinking his blood. Ah! you would have thought it a strange sight if you had seen me hanging to that owl, as he flew over the church and the trees in the moon-light. How I swung in the air, and what a screeching he made, to be sure. But he was quiet enough afterwards—it was his last flight, I assure you. Then there is another story I could tell you."

"But all your stories are about killing," said Tommy Smith.

"Why, if it comes to that," said the weasel, "I am a very great warrior, you know, so of course I have my battles to talk about. Why do you know"—the weasel gave a little jerk upwards and looked at Tommy Smith in a very fierce sort of way—"I am one of the bravest animals that there is in the world."

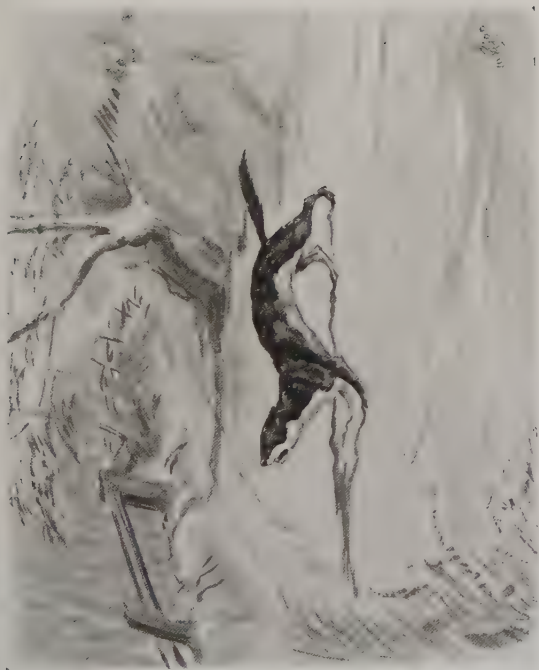
"Are you?" said Tommy Smith.

"Yes," said the weasel. "There is no animal, however big, that I would be afraid to fight. Why, if you were to provoke me, you know, I would not mind fighting you."

"Oh, come," said Tommy Smith, "I have a good thick stick in my hand, and I think I could beat you with it. You may be very brave, Mr. Weasel, but you are very little, you know."

"Little as you may think me," said the weasel, "I have made men run for their lives. Of course on such occasions I was not alone, but had a few stout comrades with me. Once we would have killed a man, I think, if another one had not happened to come by on horse-back and helped him with his whip. That was not fair, you know."

"However could you kill a man?" said



"I WOULD NOT MIND FIGHTING YOU"

Tommy Smith. "It must be a funny man, I think, that could not defend himself against you."

"You see," said the weasel, "we all made for his throat, and as fast as he pulled one of us off two or three more of us were there. At last he began to get exhausted, and we should soon have killed him, if only we had been let alone."

"I am very glad you weren't," said Tommy Smith. "But what had he done to you to make you so angry? Why was it that you attacked him?"

"He had interfered with the family of a pair of us," the weasel answered, "and, of course, no weasel can put up with that. When our young are in danger we are ready to die to defend them, and then we always come to one another's assistance."

"That is nice of you," said Tommy Smith. "Then you have some good points, Mr. Weasel."

"Some, indeed!" said the weasel. "I have said already that we are very useful animals, and now I will tell you why. You know what a nuisance rats and mice are in the country, how they swarm in farmyards, and eat all the corn and grain, and then get into houses and steal everything in the larder and kitchen. Well,

there is no better mouser or ratter in the world than a weasel, and we kill so many of them, that the farmers ought to give us a gold medal, *I* think, instead of treating us in the way they do."

"But can you kill a rat?" said Tommy Smith. "He must be stronger than you, I should think, and he knows how to fight as well as you do."

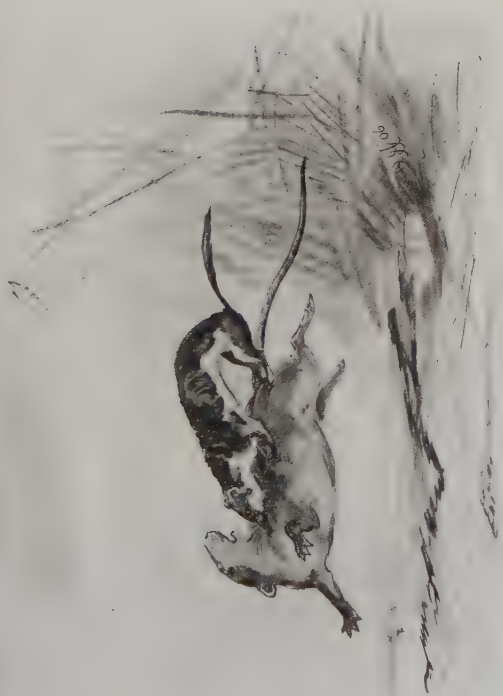
"An old rat," said the weasel, "is certainly rather troublesome. In fact I was once nearly killed by one. You see he has very long, sharp teeth, and his way of using them is not at all nice. He bites you over and over again so that you are wounded in all sorts of different places. That hardly seems fair, because *I* only bite *him* in one place."

"But if you kill him in that way ——" said Tommy Smith.

"I don't always," said the weasel. "It all depends upon how I get hold of him. You see he is bigger than I am, and a great biter, as I say."

"Well, and how do you manage it?" asked Tommy Smith.

"Why, I come up behind," said the weasel, "and bite him at the back of the neck. That is the only way to get the better of a large full-grown rat. When I have once fixed my



"I CAME UP BEHIND"

teeth I never let go, and then I throw my front paws round his neck and roll over on my side. The more he struggles the more I hug him, and keep on sucking his blood. My neck is another great advantage to me. It is very long, as you see, and very strong as well, and I can twist it about like a snake. That makes it very difficult for anything I have got hold of to get away, for however they twist about, my neck can twist with them and I can still keep my teeth in their throat.

"And do you like killing rats like that, Mr. Weasel?" said Tommy Smith.

"Like it!" said the weasel, "I should think so. Why, it *is* killing, you know, and there is nothing I like so much as killing in the whole world. I am a true sportsman."

"I think you are very bloodthirsty, if that's what you mean," said Tommy Smith.

The weasel looked extremely pleased, and said, "Yes, that's what I mean, of course; but you need not have said so, because it's what everybody means when he says he's a true sportsman".

"I don't know about *that*, Mr. Weasel," said Tommy Smith.

"Oh, some people never know the meaning of things," said the weasel. "I *dō* and I

don't believe in concealment where there is nothing to conceal. No, no, the truth for me. I am a bloodthirsty animal and a true sportsman, and I'm proud of it."

"Proud of being bloodthirsty!" cried Tommy Smith.

"Why, *you* used to be, you know," said the weasel. "You were always hunting rats at one time, and whenever you killed one you were proud of it."

Tommy Smith did not quite know what to say to this, and whilst he was trying to think of a good answer the weasel went on with "And so you see what a useful animal I am. If it were not for me there would be too many rats in the world—some people think there are too many as it is—and as for mice, I am sure I don't know what we should do with them. *They* are my ordinary food, you know."

"Aren't they too quick for you?" said Tommy Smith.

"Too quick for *me*!" said the weasel. "I can run as fast as they can, and there are not many places that they can get into where I can't follow them. A hole too small for me will be too small for them. That is the advantage of being slimly and elegantly made. And besides," the weasel continued, "it doesn't matter how fast

they run, because I follow them by the scent, so that I needn't even see them till I track them down into their holes."

"Then you have a good nose, Mr. Weasel?" said Tommy Smith.

"I should think so," said the weasel. "I hunt rabbits in that way too, you know, and sometimes five or six of us will join together, and follow them, like a pack of hounds. Ah, you should see a rabbit when *I* get up to him. Why, he is so frightened that sometimes he will scream with terror."

"Poor little bunny!" said Tommy Smith.

"Yes," said the weasel, "perhaps he is to be pitied, but you see a true sportsman can't be expected to think in that way. Rabbit's blood is extremely nice, you know. So is hare's, for the matter of that."

"But can you really kill a hare, Mr. Weasel?" said Tommy Smith. He remembered that the hare himself had told him so; but somehow, in thinking it over afterwards, he had come to the conclusion that it must be a stoat that he meant.

"Not kill a hare!" said the weasel. "I can do it just as well as the stoat can, though *he* may not be of that opinion. Still, rabbits are easier to manage, and they are more plentiful.

Their blood is as good too—and then again mice are everywhere. After all there is nothing much better than a good draught of mouse-blood—unless it be rat's. That perhaps is richer, but all have their quality." The weasel paused for a little, and shut its eyes. Then it said, quite suddenly, "But this is thirsty talking. I'm afraid I must ask you to excuse me."

"Do you mean you want to go, Mr. Weasel?" said Tommy Smith.

"Yes, that's it," said the weasel. "I hope you won't think me rude; but you see I'm a true sportsman, and I *do* want a drink of blood. Ta, ta!"—and the weasel nodded its head and was off. Just as he was going into the hedge he stopped and looked back.

"You needn't promise *me* anything," he said, in his little sharp, squeaky voice, "*I* can take care of myself." And as he said this he disappeared into the hedge.

Tommy Smith was not sorry to be without him. "He is a pert, disagreeable and very cruel little animal," he said to himself, as he walked home. "But, after all, he does do good, and I think farmers are silly to want to kill him. It must be worth a fowl, now and then, to have fewer rats and mice."

CHAPTER V

THE BLACKBIRD AND THE THRUSH

THERE was a little plantation on one side of the lane that Tommy Smith walked home by, and as he was passing it, all at once a bird flew out of the hedge on that side, and up into one of the trees, with a loud noisy cry that went on for quite a long time. Tommy Smith knew the note as well as he did the bird—every one knows it who lives in the country—and as he was as much accustomed now to have talks with animals as with people, he could not help saying, quite naturally :—

“Oh, is that you, Mrs. Blackbird?” for he saw by the plumage that it was a hen, and not a cock.

“*Is it me?*” said the blackbird—she should have said, “*Is it I?*” perhaps, but it did not sound wrong to Tommy Smith, because he was more accustomed to speaking than reading—“*Is it me, indeed!* And who else could it be,

pray? There are not many birds that have a note like that, I think."

"Not many, perhaps," said Tommy Smith; "but there is one, you know. I have heard the thrush make just the same sort of noise."

"Noise!" said the blackbird—she had flown back into the hedge by this time—"that is not a very polite way of talking. Melody, *I* should call it."

"Oh, no, Mrs. Blackbird," said Tommy Smith. "That is not the way you sing, you know. I know how nicely you do that. Only, you know, it is your husband and not you," he added, "that sings so beautifully."

"Oh," said the blackbird, with a little toss of her head, "if it wasn't for *me* you would never hear *him*, *I* can tell you."

"Why not, Mrs. Blackbird?" asked Tommy Smith.

"Why, he sings to me, of course," said the blackbird, with another little toss. "Didn't you know that? You and others may get the benefit of it; but it is all meant for me, so it is to me that you ought to be thankful."

"Oh, come, Mrs. Blackbird," said Tommy Smith, "if it is the cock blackbird that sings—and it is, you know—we ought to be thankful to him."

"Oh, if you *like* to put the effect before the cause," said the blackbird—"it's no use arguing with a little boy."

Tommy Smith thought it was no use arguing with a blackbird, so to change the subject (perhaps it would have been better to have changed it a little more) he said, "But perhaps you do sing a little, too, Mrs. Blackbird".

"Quite well enough to satisfy my husband," the blackbird answered, "though *you* may think it a noise. My husband, I suppose, may be considered a judge, but whether a little boy is—— Noise, indeed!"

"I only meant just that note, you know," said Tommy Smith; "and besides I didn't mean——"

"Oh, I hope you don't think I mind," said the blackbird. "That would be a funny idea. However, it is a very good note, and as for the thrush producing anything of the sort, *if* he can it is only a bad imitation. I say 'if' because *I* have not heard him, but I suppose it's too bad for me to recognise."

"He doesn't make it often," said Tommy Smith, "and perhaps it isn't quite the same. But I think he means what you do."

"As to his meaning," said the blackbird, "I know nothing about that. His performance is not creditable—but I must be off to the woods."

Tommy Smith thought he had better say nothing more about what the thrush did, as it seemed only to upset the blackbird, and whilst he was trying to think of something else the blackbird continued with "I am building my nest there".

"Oh, may I see you doing it?" said Tommy Smith. "I should so like to."

"It is getting a little late," said the blackbird ; "the early morning, you know, is the right time for nest-building. However, we have not quite finished yet, so if you come with me I may be able to show you something. Perhaps, if I feel inclined, you may even see a little of the second stage. This, I think, will almost complete the first."

As she said this the blackbird flew down into the little plantation, and began to rummage about with her bill amongst the moss, and the last year's leaves, that lay on the ground. She had soon collected a little bundle, and with a jerk of her head towards Tommy Smith, as much as to say, "Come along!" off she flew.

Tommy Smith was through the hedge in a minute and following her as fast as he could run. He was afraid of losing her, at first, amongst the trees, but they were not very thickly planted, and every now and then she

would alight in one and look back, as though to say, "Here I am". All at once a splendid cock blackbird, with beautiful orange bill and glossy jet-black plumage, flew out of a tree as she went by and began to follow her too. He kept a little behind, generally, but when she flew into one tree he would pass her and fly into another a little further on, and when she went on again he would wait till she had passed him, and then follow her, as before. In this way they flew along for a little till at last the hen blackbird made a dive into a thick bush under a holly-tree, and when Tommy Smith came up he saw that she was on her nest. As for the cock blackbird, he flew to a silver birch that stood near, and sat there waiting.

"You mustn't talk to me now," said the hen blackbird, as Tommy Smith was going to ask her a question. "I am seriously occupied."

And as she said this she pressed herself down into the nest and began to move about in it, in quite an excited way, spreading out her wings all the while so that they lay on the rim of the nest on each side, and bringing her tail down just outside it, till it was pressed hard against the rim and seemed almost to take hold of it—like a hand, Tommy Smith thought. It was plain that she was doing something

very important, and the expression of her face said plainly that she did not wish to be interrupted. "There!" she said at last, as she relaxed her efforts and came out of the nest, "that is done, and I think it is well done. You saw me, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes, Mrs. Blackbird," said Tommy Smith, "but I couldn't quite make out what you were doing."

"What I was doing!" said the blackbird. "Why, what should I have been doing? I was making my nest, to be sure."

"Oh, yes," said Tommy Smith; "but I couldn't quite see how you were making it. You had put in the moss and leaves, you know, when I came, and I didn't see you do anything with your beak."

"I was moulding the materials," said the hen blackbird, "and giving firmness and consistency to the entire structure."

"Oh," said Tommy Smith, and that was all he could say, for he did not in the least understand what the blackbird meant.

"But there!" said the blackbird, "you are not an architect, so I mustn't talk as if you were. My husband is not an architect either, and whenever I forget that and talk as if he were one, he turns his head away and begins to

preen himself—as he's doing now, though I don't think he heard me. Well, then, to speak in a way you can understand, I was just getting the nest into shape, and to do that, you see, I had to press it out from the inside, and pull it in from the outside. A nest, to be worth anything, must have a nice round cup to it; the cup, you know, is the part in which we sit. Well, you see how round and soft my breast is, so when I press it against the inside of the nest that makes *it* nice and round too. Then when I put my wings and tail over the edge and pull inwards with them, that presses everything together, and makes it firm and strong. That was what I was doing when you saw me just now. Just laying the things down in the nest is nothing. Any one could do that; but to know how to deal with them afterwards one must be an architect. As for me, I am a born architect, and so of course I do know."

"Oh, yes, Mrs. Blackbird," said Tommy Smith, "but doesn't your husband help you?"

"In a way he does," said the hen blackbird, "for he attends me in a respectful manner when I go to collect materials, and when I fly back with them he follows me as you saw, and all the time I am building he sits and watches me •

as he is doing now, and of course that is all very pleasant and encouraging. I have his sympathy and admiration, which is help in itself; but in the actual construction he takes no part, for, as I told you, he is no architect."

"Oh, but, Mrs. Blackbird," said Tommy Smith, "I have seen a cock blackbird take some grass in his bill and fly up into some ivy where he had his nest. What did he do that for if he wasn't going to build it?"

"Well," said the hen blackbird, "some husbands may be different. I have only had one, and that is not *his* way. Still, I have no desire to change. I am content to be looked up to, and besides it leaves more power in one's hands. You see a husband that helped to build the nest might have an opinion of his own upon various points in connection with it, its situation and so forth. He might prefer it, for instance, to be in a fir-tree instead of in a hawthorn-bush; but I should like to hear *mine* talk in that way. No, no, I am not exacting, and I am content with things as they are."

"Oh, yes, Mrs. Blackbird," said Tommy Smith, not knowing quite what to say.

"And then," continued the blackbird, "when I hear him sing. Ah! listen. Was not that beautiful"—and indeed it was. "No, no, I

am not exacting. It is enough to be loved and admired, to be sung to and to have the real power in one's hands. Things are as they should be when they are like that. Don't you agree with me?"

"Oh, yes," said Tommy Smith.

"I hope you always will," said the blackbird. "But now I must go on building my nest. It is ready for the second stage now, which is the mud stage, you know."

"The mud stage?" exclaimed Tommy Smith.

"Yes," said the blackbird. "Come along and you will see what I mean."

Off she flew again, and as soon as the cock blackbird saw her go, he followed her as before. On the other side of the plantation there was a marshy meadow, with a little dyke cut through it. Marsh marigolds were growing on its banks, and just at the edge of the water there was some very black mud. The two blackbirds made straight for this dyke, and whilst the cock perched in an osier-bush that grew above it, the hen went right down on the mud and began to dig into it with her bill. At first Tommy Smith thought that she was only scooping out the mud itself, but when he watched her a little more closely he saw that

she was really collecting some small plants that grew in it, and when she pulled these up there was always a lot of mud hanging to their roots. As soon as she had enough she started home, and then it looked as if she was carrying a large lump of mud in her bill. The cock blackbird had been watching her all the time, and he seemed to be very interested in everything she did. "Come along!" he cried, at last, when he saw her rise into the air, and out he flew from the osier-bush, and away they both went through the woods. Of course Tommy Smith ran after them as fast as he could, and as they did not fly straight back, but flitted from tree to tree in the same way that they had done before, he was at the nest again almost as soon as the hen blackbird, for the cock did not come with her, but only sat in his birch-tree, in the way his wife liked him to.

"Now," said the hen blackbird, "if you watch me you will see that I know how to plaster as well as how to build. A good architect, you know, must have mastered the technique of his profession."

Tommy Smith saw that the water-plants, with the mud sticking to them, were lying in a mass at the bottom of the nest; but now the blackbird began to pull them up with her bill

and to daub and plaster them over the whole interior. When she had finished one could hardly see the plants for the black mud which was smeared all over them, for the blackbird had used her bill almost as if it were a trowel. "There!" she said, as she stopped and looked at her work. "What do you think of that?"

"Oh, I think it's very nice indeed," said Tommy Smith; "but won't it be rather dirty to sit in when you are hatching your eggs?"

"Dirty!" said the blackbird. "Certainly not. It gets quite dry, you know, and besides it will be covered up first."

"Covered up!" cried Tommy Smith.

"Certainly," said the blackbird, "with more moss and leaves, you know, for a lining."

"But what is the good of the mud then?" said Tommy Smith, "and why do you plaster it at all?"

"A very proper question," said a voice behind Tommy Smith, and, looking round, he saw a fine speckled thrush perched in the holly-tree a little above his head. "A very proper question," the thrush repeated. "What is the use of making a nice smooth cup to sit in, if you don't sit in it?"

"I don't make it to sit in," said the blackbird indignantly.

"Then why do you make it at all?" said the thrush.

"Really," said the blackbird, "if you were a lady, like myself, I should fly at you and drive you away. I could soon do it, then, you know; but as you are a cock bird it would be better if I were to call my husband."

"It would be better still if you were to answer the question," said the thrush.

Tommy Smith could not help thinking that this was a very sensible remark of the thrush's. "Supposing," he said gently, "that you two were to have an argument about it."

"It would be of no use," said the blackbird. "It is a subject on which we have been at variance for a very long time, and we are not likely to agree about it now."

"But you might have an argument without agreeing," said Tommy Smith. He had listened to his father and mother, and knew that this was possible.

"What would be the good of that?" said the blackbird.

"Oh," said Tommy Smith, "you might each of you say what you thought, and I could decide which had the best of the argument."

"I have no time to waste in such nonsense," said the blackbird, "and besides, there is no

reasoning with a thrush. I have made my nest for a great many years, and I ought to know how comfortable it is."

"I know how comfortable mine is," said the thrush.

"How can it be," said the blackbird, "with no lining inside?"

"It is soft enough without that," said the thrush; "our young ones have never found it too hard."

"And *my* young ones have never found *my* nest too soft," said the blackbird.

"You see," said the thrush, turning to Tommy Smith, "the advantage of our plan is this, that when we have smeared the inside of our nest with cow-dung and rotten wood——"

"Cow-dung and rotten wood!" exclaimed Tommy Smith in surprise. "Is that what you do it with, Mr. Thrush?"

"A pretty composition!" said the blackbird. "I should be sorry to hatch out my young ones on *that*."

"I should be sorry for mine to sit over mud," said the thrush.

"But I cover the mud up," said the blackbird.

"Which shows you're ashamed of it," said the thrush.

The blackbird looked very indignant at this, and Tommy Smith was afraid she would call her husband, so he said soothingly, "You know, Mrs. Blackbird, different birds make different kinds of nests, and each kind may be very nice in its way. I know yours is a very nice one, because I have often seen it after it was finished, and had eggs in it."

"Yes, and you used to take them," said the blackbird.

"I never do now," said Tommy Smith. "And as for *your* nest, Mr. Thrush——" he was beginning.

"What I was going to say when I was interrupted," said the thrush, "was this, that the advantage of laying our eggs, as soon as we have plastered our nest with the very best materials, instead of waiting to undo what we have done—which would only be silly—is that we get them laid sooner. Then, of course, they are hatched sooner, and so we get more children out into the world."

"There would be quite enough without that," said the blackbird, "considering how early you begin to build. Why, you have sometimes a family in January, which *I* think quite ridiculous."

"Why?" said the thrush.

"I have no more time to waste," said the blackbird. "If Tommy Smith has, that is another matter ; but as for me, I must get some more mud for my nest." And with a little nod to Tommy Smith—but he did not think it a *very* cordial one—she was gone, and as she flew off the nest she made that same noisy cry that the conversation had commenced about.

"I know what *that* means," said the thrush. "It's temper, that is. She's offended."

Tommy Smith was afraid she was too, and he felt very sorry.

"I didn't want to offend her," he said. "It was your fault, Mr. Thrush."

"Oh, she'll get over it," the thrush answered. "We're not such bad friends, on the whole, you know—we even marry each other sometimes—but the fact is that I'm cleverer than she is—when I say 'I,' I mean, of course, my family—and that's where the shoe pinches."

"Are you sure you are cleverer, Mr. Thrush?" said Tommy Smith.

"Oh, dear me, yes," the thrush answered. "A thrush is cleverer than a blackbird, though a blackbird might tell you otherwise, which would be very conceited of him. However, there can be no doubt of it. The nest is a

sufficient test, *I* think. Fancy using mere common mud when one might use rotten wood and cow-dung mixed together—a composite material, you know. And then fancy making a nice smooth cup, all for nothing. Why, you might almost think that nest was a thrush's nest now, except that it's blacker and not so pretty. And then she goes and covers it all up."

Tommy Smith did not feel nearly so sure as the thrush did that his nest was really the best, but he thought there would be no good in having another argument about it. So he changed the subject and said, "But that would only make one way in which you were cleverer than the blackbird, Mr. Thrush".

"Well," said the thrush, "there will be just time for me to show you another. Have you ever seen a blackbird do this?" And as he asked the question he flew down from the holly-bush on to the ground, and picked up a large snail in his bill. Then he hopped with it to a rather large flat stone that lay close to the hedge and just on the edge of the plantation. "I always come here," he said, "whenever I get a snail—that is if I happen to be anywhere near it;" and indeed Tommy Smith noticed that there were pieces of broken snail-

shell all over the stone, that seemed to have been wet, and stuck there.

"Oh, I know," said Tommy Smith, and at the same moment the thrush lifted up its head, and gave the snail a great bang against the stone, and then he went on banging it, first on the one side and then on the other, at such a rate that it looked as if his head was going round in a circle. Of course the shell was soon broken to pieces, and the juices of the poor snail, now no longer protected by it, flew all about like a little shower-bath. Then the thrush threw the moist morsel backwards and forwards along the ground, till it was all over dust and earth, which, of course, made it very much drier.

"There!" he said, as he arranged it nicely in his bill. "Now it is ready for eating; but I shall do that somewhere else. Good-bye, and if you wait here till the blackbird comes back, you may tell her what you saw me do."

"Can't she do it?" said Tommy Smith.

"When *you* see her you must let me know," said the thrush. "Good-bye," and off he flew with the snail.

Tommy Smith waited a little for the blackbird; but as she did not come, and it was getting near dinner-time, he thought he had better go home.

CHAPTER VI

THE HEDGEHOG

WHEN Tommy Smith had had his conversation with the thrush and black-bird, he began to walk home, as I told you ; but before he had got out of the plantation he heard a rustling amongst some bushes, which made him stop and look about. He could not see anything, and now it was quite still ; but soon the rustling began again, so this time he called out, "Who are you ?"

"Why, don't you know *me* ?" a funny little voice answered. "You have seen me before, and there is no other animal at all like me."

"But I can't see you now," said Tommy Smith, "and I don't know your voice at all, so unless you come out of the bush——"

"Just wait a minute," the voice replied. "I am only half-way through an adder, and must reconcile myself to leaving it. It requires a minute, at least, to do that, you know."

So Tommy Smith waited, wondering what

animal it was that could be eating an adder, and, at the end of about a minute, what should come trotting out of the bush but a little hedgehog, which came running up to him as if he was glad to make his acquaintance.

"Well," said the hedgehog, "you didn't expect to see *me*, I suppose."

"Oh, I don't know," said Tommy Smith; "but at any rate, I didn't expect you to be eating an adder. Is it really true, Mr. Hedgehog?"

"True!" said the hedgehog. "Why, didn't you hear me say so? And don't you know that a hedgehog is a truthful animal? If you had come a little earlier you might have asked the adder, for he was not dead then, and would have supported me, I feel sure. But now I have eaten too much of him."

"Too much of him!" cried Tommy Smith. "Oh, you don't mean to say that you were eating him alive, Mr. Hedgehog."

"Yes, I do," said the hedgehog. "You see I begin at the tail, and if he doesn't happen to be dead when I do begin, he is often alive till I get to about the middle of him."

"But don't you kill him first?" said Tommy Smith. He felt quite horrified at what the hedgehog said.

"Oh, I just give his head a bite," said the hedgehog; "but that doesn't always kill him. It's just chance, you know, and we must all take our chance. I have to take mine, of course."

"You mean about getting bitten?" said Tommy Smith.

"Oh, no," said the hedgehog, "I don't trouble about that. I mean as to whether I come across a snake or not."

Tommy Smith was very much surprised to hear the hedgehog talk in this way. "You know that the adder is poisonous, Mr. Hedgehog," he said, "so that if he were to bite you, you would die."

At this the hedgehog gave a shrill little laugh.

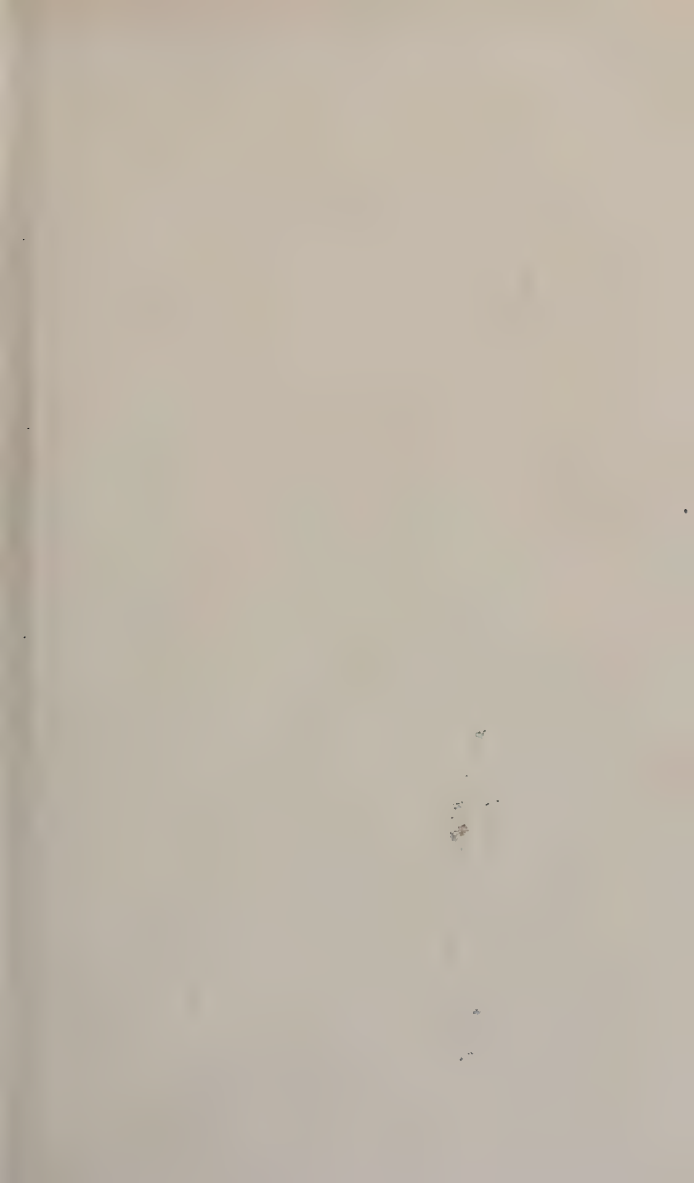
"Do you really think so?" he said. "At that rate I ought to have been dead long ago, for I have often been bitten by an adder; but you see here I am, quite alive."

"Then doesn't his poison hurt you?" said Tommy Smith in surprise.

"Not a bit," said the hedgehog, "and no other poison does either. I am so clever that poison has no effect on me."

"But what do you do to prevent it?" asked Tommy Smith.

"Oh, I don't do anything," said the hedge-





"NOW, PERHAPS, YOU WILL BELIEVE ME."

hog. "I take no notice of it and it does me no harm."

"I don't see what being clever has to do with it," said Tommy Smith.

"There must be some reason," said the hedgehog, "and *I* put it down to cleverness. It is a very clever thing, *I* think, to kill and eat a poisonous snake whether he bites you or not. However, I do not wish to boast."

"But do you really kill snakes?" said Tommy Smith, for in spite of what the hedgehog had said about being truthful, he could hardly believe it. "Oh, but don't be offended," he added, for, instead of answering, the hedgehog had turned round, and was running off to the bush. Very soon, however, he came running back again, carrying about half a dead adder in his mouth.

"There!" he said, as he dropped it on the ground, "now perhaps you will believe me. You see it is almost half finished, and who but I could have eaten it? However, if you would rather see me eat the rest than have a conversation——"

"Oh, no," said Tommy Smith, "I would much rather go on talking. And besides, Mr. Hedgehog," he explained, "I didn't disbelieve you, only I thought you lived upon insects."

"So I do," said the hedgehog. "You would soon find that out if you were to put me into a kitchen that was overrun with black-beetles. I am an insectivorous animal; but I eat lots of other things as well, and snakes are one of them. You do not object to *that*, I suppose? A snake, you know, is a poisonous reptile."

"The adder is," said Tommy Smith, "but not the grass-snake; he is quite harmless."

"Harmless!" said the hedgehog, "why, he eats toads and frogs which are useful animals, so he can't complain if sometimes he gets eaten himself. We animals, you know, have to live on one another."

"Yes, I know that, Mr. Hedgehog," said Tommy Smith. "But I daresay *you* would complain if some other animal were to eat *you*."

"Not at all," said the hedgehog, "but perhaps *he* might. However any one may try." And the hedgehog shook his prickles and gave a sort of chuckle to himself.

"Of course with a skin like that, Mr. Hedgehog——" Tommy Smith was beginning.

"I am not afraid of any one," the hedgehog continued, "only it ought to be a fair fight, you know, and when I am caught in a trap and then stamped on or beaten to death with a

stick, I think I have a right to feel sore. That is not fair at all, and it is a funny way to treat a useful animal who kills snakes and is always ready to eat black-beetles."

"And do you really do no harm, Mr. Hedgehog?" Tommy Smith asked.

"Very little, I am sure," answered the hedgehog. "Perhaps I eat a pheasant's egg now and again; but what is that compared to keeping down snakes and black-beetles? And who are pheasants, I should like to know, that such a lot should be thought of them? After all, they are not so very interesting. Now I am one of the most interesting and curious little animals that there are, and I think the woods would be pleasanter to walk in if a little more could be seen of me. But I am always being trapped and killed by those stupid wretches, the keepers."

Tommy Smith could not help agreeing with what the hedgehog said. "But, you know," he said, "it's not the keepers, but their masters, who tell them to do it."

"More shame for them," said the hedgehog. "However, let us talk of something less painful. Perhaps you would like to ask me some questions."

Tommy Smith thought for a little, and then

he said, "Is it true, Mr. Hedgehog, that no other animal is able to get the better of you? I mean in a fair fight."

"It is quite true," said the hedgehog. "Why, what can they do? You know my wonderfully clever trick. Every one does, I suppose. There! now I have rolled myself up. I should like to see the dog or the cat or the fox that could make me unroll myself before I wanted to. No, no, he could only prick his nose, and what good would that do him? Well, don't you think that a clever trick?" and the hedgehog unrolled himself again, and stood looking at Tommy Smith. "They talk of the fox," he continued, after Tommy Smith had agreed with him, "and the cunning things he does. But I never heard of *his* rolling himself up into a ball, so that nobody could touch him. That is as clever as jumping into a hollow tree, to get out of the way of the hounds, isn't it?"

"It is not quite the same, you know," said Tommy Smith.

"Of course I know," said the hedgehog. "If it were the same it would not be any cleverer; but it is much cleverer, *I* think. Why, to get into a hollow tree, you would have to get to one first, and it might be a

long way off; but I can roll up into a ball anywhere."

"But then it's easier to do a thing like that, Mr. Hedgehog," said Tommy Smith.

"Easier!" said the hedgehog. "Why, it's easy enough for a fox to jump into a hollow tree if it's not too high, and of course if it is too high he doesn't do it."

"But he has to think of it, you know," said Tommy Smith.

"Think of it," said the hedgehog, "why, *I* think of it every time when I roll myself up. I don't think much of *that* argument."

"But you see, Mr. Hedgehog," said Tommy Smith, "*your* trick is a part of yourself, but——"

"Brains, when one has them, *are* a part of oneself," said the hedgehog. "I really can't think what you mean by such a way of talking."

Tommy Smith knew exactly what he meant, and he wondered that the hedgehog did not understand him, though he found it difficult to explain. "But he's like all the rest of the animals, I suppose," he said to himself, "they *will* all think themselves the cleverest."

"So you see," continued the hedgehog, "I am really a cleverer animal even than the fox, because I have a cleverer trick than he has,

and yet nobody seems to think so. However, I know why that is. Everybody knows my trick, and when things are common they are not properly appreciated."

Tommy Smith saw that it was no use arguing with the hedgehog, and so he thought the best thing to do was to learn something more about him. "I suppose that is not your only trick, Mr. Hedgehog," he said.

"Not quite," the hedgehog answered, and it seemed to Tommy Smith as if he shut one of his funny-looking, little bleared eyes. "I have one which perhaps *you* would think cleverer still, because it is not so common, you know; but let us say that it is as clever only, for I do not wish to talk conceitedly. Ah, if you were only to see me one day in an orchard."

"In an orchard?" said Tommy Smith.

"Yes," said the hedgehog, "when the apples and pears were lying about on the ground. Then, if you saw me trotting away with a lot of them stuck on my prickles, I suppose even you would admit that the fox need not trouble himself to give *me* lessons. I should like to see *him* do that."

"Oh, but do you really mean that you carry them away on your quills, so as to take them somewhere?" said Tommy Smith.

"Of course I do," said the hedgehog. "I have a home, you know, with a wife and children in it sometimes, and it is nicer to eat apples there than in somebody's orchard. Well, and what do you say to that?"

Tommy Smith was wondering what he should say. "I should like to *see* you do it, Mr. Hedgehog," he said at last, "because I didn't know you did eat apples. If you were to come to our orchard now—not that I don't believe you," he added, for he was afraid the hedgehog would be offended.

"Oh, I never refuse a test," said the hedgehog. "You have only to lead the way."

Tommy Smith jumped up at once to walk home, but he had scarcely taken a step or two when he stopped and said, "Oh, but I had forgotten. It is only the early summer, so, of course, there are no apples or pears on the ground."

"Dear me," said the hedgehog, "I never thought of that. Well, I suppose, we must wait for the autumn, unless *you* can think of anything else."

But Tommy Smith could not think of anything else, so there was nothing to do but to stay in the wood a little longer, and continue the conversation.

"Your spines must be very useful to you, Mr. Hedgehog," said Tommy Smith after awhile. He was still thinking of the apples.

"Useful!" said the hedgehog, "I should just think they were. I'm sure I don't know what I should do without them. Oh, dear! fancy having no prickles! I should never be able to jump off a wall fourteen feet high without hurting myself, then."

"Jump off a wall fourteen feet high!" cried Tommy Smith.

"Yes," said the hedgehog, "or twenty feet, I daresay, for the matter of that. Why, that's nothing to me, you know."

Here was another surprise for Tommy Smith. What with his snake-killing, and apple-stealing, and jumping off walls, the hedgehog seemed to be quite the most surprising of all the animals he had spoken to.

"But what have the prickles got to do with it?" he asked, after thinking for a little.

"Oh, everything," the hedgehog replied. "I should never manage it without *them*. You see, as soon as I have jumped I curl myself up in the air, so that I must come down on my prickles, because, of course, they are everywhere then. Now my prickles are very elastic—that is one of their properties, you know—and

they are bent at the end next the skin, which makes them still more elastic. I don't know why, but it does. So as my prickles are all round me, I am like an elastic ball, and instead of hurting myself, when I come down, I bounce, as an elastic ball would do, and then I uncurl myself and walk away."

"Do you really, Mr. Hedgehog?" said Tommy Smith. "That does seem wonderful."

"Wonderfully clever, is it not?" said the hedgehog, "and it makes one more thing that the fox cannot do."

Tommy Smith thought it was best to make no answer to this remark, so he tried to think of another question. "Oh, Mr. Hedgehog," he said at last, after stroking his quills for a little—for now they were laid down quite smoothly—"you said something about your wife and family. Have you got a wife and family now?"

"They are not far off," the hedgehog answered. "But as for seeing them, that is another matter. You see, our children are almost too young to leave the nest, and, of course, their mother would not leave *them* for an instant."

"Oh, but can't I see them *in* the nest?" asked Tommy Smith.

"*That* is impossible," said the hedgehog. "It is in the very centre of that extremely thick bush, which I don't think even you could crawl into. However, if you like to follow me——"

Tommy Smith looked at the bush, and was obliged to admit that he could not follow the hedgehog.

"What a pity," he said, "I should so have liked to have seen them."

"It is a pity," said the hedgehog. "They are the funniest little things you ever did see, and as for the nest, my own opinion is that, as a work of architecture, it takes the very first place. It is most beautifully woven of moss and grass, and its thatching of leaves is beyond everything. Not a drop of rain can come through it, so that the children never get wet, even in the heaviest showers. In fact it is a wonder. I don't wish to speak conceitedly, still it is impossible to see it without reflecting on the skill of those who made it."

"I wish *I* could see it," said Tommy Smith, "and still more the little ones."

"I am afraid they are too young," said the hedgehog. "However, if you wait there a moment——" And with that he trotted into the bush.

Tommy Smith listened to him rustling in it for a little, then it was quiet, and he thought he heard a few little squeakings and gruntings as if a conversation was going on in the real hedgehog language. Then there was some more rustling, and all at once the hedgehog came out again and—could it be?—yes. Tommy Smith gave a cry of delight, and threw his cap into the air, for there were four little hedgehogs with him.

“Hush!” said the hedgehog, “you had better not do that. Their mother thinks loud noises are bad for them.”

“Be quieter, pray,” said another voice—a much more severe one—and as he looked in the direction from which it came, Tommy Smith saw a funny little black nose and eyes just peering out at him from the edge of the bush. It was the mother hedgehog.

“She won’t come out,” said the father hedgehog; “she is shyer than I am, and, between ourselves, not so good-tempered. Don’t be rough with her children, and be careful to say the right thing, or she will call them back again.”

But Tommy Smith had gone down on his knees beside the young hedgehogs, and had no ears or eyes for anything else. “Oh, what

funny little things they are," he cried. "Why, they are quite pink, and their quills are white, and don't look like quills at all. They are quite soft and lie down flat on the skin. And underneath they are naked, and——"

"Don't take them up," said the father hedgehog. "Their mother doesn't think it good for them to be lifted."

"It is enough to be allowed to stroke them," said the severe voice from the bush; "more should not be expected."

So Tommy Smith stroked the little hedgehogs, which were about the size of very small kittens. They looked more like puppies, though, he thought, they were so fat and funny-looking. Presently he noticed that they had tails, and this surprised him because he had never seen a tail on a grown-up hedgehog, and he could not help mentioning it to their father who stood close by.

"We *have* tails," said the father hedgehog, in a tone of decision, "but they are hidden under our quills, as theirs will be some day when they are grown up. You see their quills are quite short at present, and their tails are longer in proportion to their size than ours are."

"Isn't that rather funny?" said Tommy Smith.

"Funny, indeed!" said the voice inside the bush—more severe than ever it sounded.

"You had better take care," said the father hedgehog. "You are not saying the—— Oh, please, don't do that. Their mother thinks it bad for them to have their tails too much handled."

"*Thinks* it bad," said the voice again—it was more than severe this time.

"I won't touch them," said Tommy Smith. "I'll only just look at them a little."

So Tommy Smith brought his head close down and looked at the little hedgehogs, first at their tails, and then all over, and the more he looked the funnier they seemed to be, and at last he gave a loud laugh and said, "Well, of all the queer little creatures, I do think they're the queerest. They look like little pink sausages, with pieces of fat all over them, and a puppy dog's head and tail stuck on at the two ends."

"Oh, but don't go, little puppy dogs," he called out all of a sudden—"do stay." But it was of no use. The four young hedgehogs had all disappeared into the bush.

"She has called them in," said the father hedgehog. "You will never see them again, nor their mother either."

"Oh, but why?" said Tommy Smith in a very disappointed tone.

"You have not said the right thing," said the father hedgehog. "Good evening. I must finish my snake."

So Tommy Smith walked home quite sadly, thinking of the little hedgehogs all the way. "Their mother was very touchy, I think," he said to himself; "but the next time I see them—if ever I do—I must try to say the right thing."

CHAPTER VII

THE DABCHICK

THE next walk that Tommy Smith took was by a little stream that ran not far from his house. There was generally some bird to be seen upon it—a moorhen or wild duck or perhaps a kingfisher—but somehow, this morning, there did not seem to be so many birds or animals as there usually were. Those he did see were a good way off, all except a water-rat that was swimming near the bank, but swam over into a bed of reeds, without saying anything, as soon as he saw Tommy Smith. “I wish he would come back again,” said Tommy Smith to himself. “I should like a talk with him, and that lump of weeds there, floating on the water, would make a nice place for him to sit. But I can’t wait for him any longer,” he continued, “so if he doesn’t *want* a conversation—— Oh,” cried Tommy Smith, all of a sudden, “why, whatever was that? I saw something move upon the weeds.

Oh, there! I saw it again. I do believe the water-rat has come back."

"No, he has not come back," said a voice from the very centre of the little heap of weeds, "but *I* have been here all the time."

"Oh, but who are you?" said Tommy Smith. "Are you another water-rat?"

"Oh, dear no," the voice answered. "I am not a water-rat at all. Thank goodness, I am a water-bird."

"Oh, but what bird?" said Tommy Smith. "You seem very small, and the weeds go down in the middle so that I can hardly see you. You are not the moorhen, I am sure."

"I am *not*," said the voice. "I am glad you are sure of that, even though you can't see me properly. When you *do* see me properly, and have some idea of what I can do——"

"Oh, now I can see you," cried Tommy Smith, as he stood on tip-toe. "You are the dabchick. I have often seen you before, but always swimming or dipping about amongst the reeds and rushes. I didn't know you sat on a lot of weeds, like that."

"I sit on my *nest*," said the dabchick, "which is something better, I hope, than a lot of weeds."

"It looks like that," said Tommy Smith. "But is it really your nest, Mrs. Dabchick?"

"Is it my nest!" said the dabchick. "It is my family inside it, which is sufficient proof amongst respectable birds."

"Oh, do let me see your family," said Tommy Smith. "I have never seen a young dabchick, and I should so like——"

"You must have a little patience," said the dabchick. "In due course—that is to say when my husband returns—I shall leave my nest and take my little ones with me. Then you will know something about them. At present you do not even know where they are."

"Oh, but aren't they in the nest?" said Tommy Smith.

The dabchick seemed to hesitate for a little before answering, and then she said, "Well, in a way perhaps they are".

"In a way!" said Tommy Smith. "Why, what do you mean, Mrs. Dabchick? Aren't they with you then?"

"Oh, yes, they're with me," said the dabchick. "You may be quite sure about that."

"But you *are* in the nest," said Tommy Smith.

"Why, of course I am," answered the dabchick.

"Well, then, they must be in it too," said Tommy Smith very decidedly.

"Must they?" said the dabchick. "Well, perhaps they are—in a way."

Tommy Smith felt quite puzzled. What could the dabchick mean? And if she did mean anything, why couldn't she tell him? But all at once an idea occurred to him. "Ah, Mrs. Dabchick," he cried, "I know what it is. You were trying to puzzle me, but I think I've found it out. You mean that your little ones are not hatched yet. They are in the eggs, but the eggs are in the nest, you know, and so——"

"Only one is," said the dabchick. "They are all hatched but one, and I wasn't thinking about that one, because I am afraid it is addled. No, no, my three little striped beauties are no longer in their cradles."

"I wish you would tell me where they are," said Tommy Smith.

"Oh, you will soon see," said the dabchick, "for here comes their father. Look, there he is, just coming out of those rushes. Does he not swim gracefully?"

"Oh, yes," said Tommy Smith, "and so fast too. He is coming straight to the nest, I think."

"Of course he is," said the dabchick. "Where else should he be coming to? Now there will be the full family circle, and you will

soon see where the young people are. Well, my dear," she said, with a little nod to her husband, as he came up, "I have a visitor, you see. I think you know Tommy Smith."

"Oh, yes," said the father dabchick, in a hurried manner. "Well, I'll speak to him presently."

And almost as he said it, he disappeared under the water, going down so quietly that he hardly left a ripple behind him.

"He has his paternal duties to attend to, you see," said his wife. It was as though she would have said, "You must excuse him, you know," but before Tommy Smith had time to say, "Oh, of course he has," the father dabchick was up again, with a small piece of weed in his bill. He rose quite close to the nest, and then stretched his head over it towards the mother dabchick. Tommy Smith thought he had something to tell her; but all at once he saw something move upon her body, and there was a tiny little one, stretching down his neck from under her wing, and holding out his beak to be fed.

How surprised Tommy Smith was, and how delighted too. "Oh, Mrs. Dabchick," he cried out, "now I know what you meant. You have a little one on your back."

"My family consists of three," said the mother dabchick, "and I do not believe in favouring one at the expense of the others."

It was quite evident that the other two little dabchicks did not believe in doing this any more than their mother, for the next minute one of them was holding out his bill to be fed too, and the other came tumbling down his mother's side, and fell head over heels into the nest. The father dabchick fed them all three, first one and then another, and every time, before he fed one of them, he dived down and got a fresh piece of weed. It was quite the prettiest sight, Tommy Smith thought, of any he had seen, and yet, as you know, he had seen a good many.

"Well," said the mother dabchick—for the father was still too busy to speak—"what do you think of them?"

"Oh, I do think they're pretty," said Tommy Smith, "and I do like seeing them fed." Indeed he was so much interested in it that he had climbed along the trunk of a very old pollarded willow-tree that had half tumbled into the water, and now he could see everything quite plainly. "But how different they are from you and your husband, Mrs. Dabchick," he continued. "You are both of you brown

without any markings, and your beaks are brown too, with some naked white spots just above them; but your little ones are black, with yellow stripes—like a tiger almost—and their beaks are red. Why should they be so very different?"

"Why?" said the mother blackbird. "Why, because they are little, of course. It is a fact in nature, and that accounts for everything."

"Does it really?" said Tommy Smith.

"Why, of course it does," said the mother dabchick. "There is no difficulty, great or small, that cannot be accounted for in that way. Take my fourth egg here, for instance. Why should it be addled, as I told you it was, instead of hatching out like the others? Well, it is a fact in nature, that is the only explanation I know of, but it is a sufficient one."

"But how do you know that it's addled, Mrs. Dabchick?" said Tommy Smith.

"If it wasn't, the chick would have been out long ago," answered the mother dabchick. "Besides, something tells me so—I *feel* it is addled, and that reminds me that I have sat on it quite long enough."

As she said this, the mother dabchick gave a sudden jump up in the nest, and stood there

bolt upright, looking just like a little penguin. Tommy Smith thought he had never seen such a funny little figure, and he only kept himself from laughing for fear of offending her—"for all the animals are so touchy," he said to himself.

What made it all the more funny was that the two little dabchicks kept on her back all the time, though one of them was jerked out from under her wing, and almost fell off. The third one was still in the nest, where the father dabchick had been feeding it.

"Oh, dear, how stiff I feel," said the mother dabchick, as she gave her wings a quick little flapping, which almost shook the two young ones off. "Nothing like an addled egg to make one stiff," she continued. "Now, come along, my dear," and she touched her third chick as it lay in the nest—a little touch with the bill.

"You are forgetting something, my dear," said the father dabchick.

"Why, what a feather-brain I am," exclaimed the mother dabchick. "I'm always forgetting things," and, turning round, she caught up some weeds from the bottom of the nest, and, with a jerk of the head, threw them over the egg she had just been sitting on. She did this twice—each time very quickly—and



"WHAT DO YOU THINK OF US?"

with the second jerk the egg was quite covered. "There!" she said, "now no one can see it," and sinking on to her breast again, she slid down the side of the nest into the water.

"Oh, there!" cried Tommy Smith, in delight as he watched her. "And her third little chick has slid down after her, only it rolled half the way. Now they are all in the water together." And so they were, and the next minute they were all of them swimming towards Tommy Smith.

"Well," said the mother dabchick, as they came up, "now you see the united family. What do you think of us?"

"Hush, my dear," said the father dabchick. "He may not like to praise us to our face."

"It is best to be plain and outspoken," said the mother dabchick. "And, besides, we know what he thinks."

But Tommy Smith was thinking only of one thing just then, and had hardly heard what was said. "Oh, Mrs. Dabchick," he cried, "do let me look at the two little ones on your back."

"If you promise not to be rough with them," said the mother dabchick, and, coming close into the bank, she lifted up one of her wings and showed the two little striped, funny things, with their tiny red bills, lying close together

under it. Tommy Smith lay down flat on the bank—of course he had not stayed on the willow-trunk—and began to stroke the chicks, who were not at all afraid, for of course they had been told not to be, and whilst he was doing so, all at once there was a little commotion, and there was the third chick sitting comfortably under the other wing—very comfortably indeed, Tommy Smith thought, for the mother dabchick's back was all over fluff, so that it was like sitting on a powder-puff—which *ought* to be comfortable.

"Well," said the mother dabchick, "and what do you think of it? Did you ever see a more satisfactory arrangement?"

"Oh, no, I never did," said Tommy Smith. "It is the jolliest arrangement I ever saw. How nice it must be for them, going about like that. But, Mrs. Dabchick," he asked, "aren't they rather heavy for you?"

"Oh, dear me, no," the mother dabchick answered. "Heavy? How can they be? You see they are quite light, even by themselves, and when they are all three together that makes them three times as light—lightness added to lightness, you know."

"Oh, no, Mrs. Dabchick," said Tommy Smith, "I don't think that can be right."

"Oh, I think it must be," said the mother dabchick. "At any rate that's how I feel with them. Perhaps when they get on their father's, he may find it different."

"Not at all," said the father dabchick; "but you know they prefer you, dear."

"Not in myself," said the mother dabchick, "but, perhaps, my back is a little more fluffy."

"It is much more comfortable than mine, love," said the father dabchick, "and you give them two rides to my one. You are so amiable."

"But you know, dear, you feed them more than I do," said the mother dabchick, "and I think you do it even better."

"Oh, no, dear," said the father dabchick. "*That* would be impossible."

"I really think you do, dear," said the mother dabchick, as she came close up to her husband. "Or at any rate as well. Of *that* I am quite sure."

"You flatter me, love," said the father dabchick. "But come, let us have our duet." And as he said this the two little birds put their heads close together, and burst out into a funny little thin piping cry, that lasted some time, and sounded quite pretty.

"There!" said the mother dabchick, when

it was all over, "now we feel better, don't we? There is nothing like a duet when one feels inclined for it. Is there?"

"Oh, nothing," said Tommy Smith, for he thought the last question seemed meant for him. "At least I daresay there isn't," he added.

"You may take both our words for it," said the mother dabchick. "We believe in it, do we not, love?"

"I should think so," said the father dabchick, "and we have one several times every day. But, my dear," he continued, "perhaps Tommy Smith has something to ask us."

"Oh, yes," said Tommy Smith, for there was one thing that he had been meaning to ask about. "Why was it that you covered up that egg, Mrs. Dabchick, before you came off the nest?"

"That is easily answered," said the mother dabchick. "Why, didn't you hear me say that nobody would be able to see it now? That was precisely my object in covering it up."

"But do you always do that?" asked Tommy Smith.

"Always," said the mother dabchick, "or at any rate, we ought to do. Sometimes, of course, we are hurried, and then——"

"Still, we can do it so quickly," said the father dabchick. "It is just a touch on this side and that—the dabchick touch *I* call it—because no one *but* a dabchick——"

"The touch of genius, he means, you know," said the mother dabchick, "and when you come to think of it, it is one of the cleverest tricks for not letting people find out where our nest is that could possibly have been imagined."

"But, Mrs. Dabchick," said Tommy Smith, "it seems to me that your nest is very difficult to find anyhow, because it rises so little above the water, and only looks like some floating weeds."

"That is the beauty of it," said the father dabchick. "You see, we make it so that it never would be noticed unless the eggs were been lying in it. So we cover them up with weeds when we go away, and then nobody sees them."

"If it were not for this most ingenious device," said the mother dabchick, "that boy over there, who is driving the cows out of the meadow, would certainly notice our nest with the egg in it. He goes along the bank twice every day, and is always peering about, as such lads do; but he has never noticed it yet."

I don't want him to see me though, so if you will excuse me just a moment——” And as she said this, down the mother dabchick went under the water, and what was more—it surprised Tommy Smith a good deal—down went her three little chicks with her, still clinging tightly under her wings.

“Oh, really, that is wonderful,” he cried. “She is like a little submarine vessel, and the chicks are the crew. I wonder how long she will stay under.”

As Tommy Smith said this, he looked about for the father dabchick, who he thought would be able to tell him, but the father dabchick was not to be seen either.

“Well,” he said to himself, “there is nothing to do but to wait, and when the cows have gone by I shall soon see them again, for they are sure to come back to their nest.”

So Tommy Smith waited. The cows had almost got to the gate of the meadow by this time, and the boy—he was a big boy—who walked some way behind them, was soon just opposite the nest.

“What be you doin’ there, young master?” he said to Tommy Smith, as he went by.

“Oh, nothing,” Tommy Smith answered. “only just resting by the water.”

"I thought you was fishing, and watching yer float," said the boy. "You kep' lookin' at the water so. But you ha'nt got no rod, and I doant see naught to look at if it baient that blob of old weeds. There baient so much in that though." And on he went, and was soon through the gate with his cows.

"Well," said the mother dabchick, as she came up all of a sudden, with her little ones still on her back, "what did I tell you? He was looking right at it, and didn't know what it was. Now, if the egg had not been covered he would have noticed *that* directly. That shows what a clever trick ours is."

"Yes," said a little voice, that seemed to come right out of the water, "and Tommy Smith is lucky, I think, to have seen it in operation."

Of course Tommy Smith knew that it was the father dabchick who had said this, but where was he? He looked all about, but could see no one, though the voice seemed to come from quite near.

"Where are you, Mr. Dabchick?" he said; "I cannot see you anywhere."

"I daresay not," said the father dabchick's voice again, "that is another clever trick of ours."

Tommy Smith looked all about again, but he could not see the father dabchick, and there

was nothing where the voice seemed to come from except a tiny little piece of floating sedge, not big enough to hide any bird, or even a newt, that showed itself above the water. "And he can't be under the water," he said to the mother dabchick, "or else I shouldn't hear his voice."

"Not all of him," said the mother dabchick, "but perhaps a part may be."

"As much as this, for instance," said the voice again, and, at the same moment, something—it was too tiny to see what—stirred amidst the floating sedge.

Tommy Smith strained his eyes, and at last thought he saw—— Could it really be? Yes, for it was getting larger now, and he felt sure it was.

"Oh, Mr. Dabchick," he cried, "is that your beak?"

"*And* the rest of me," replied the father dabchick, bobbing up suddenly, yet quite quietly too. "So you didn't see me then? Why, I have been here all the time under these leaves, with just my eyes out, to see with. All the rest of me was under the water. I was watching that stupid boy as he went by. *He* didn't seem to see me either."

"He must have had good eyes if he did,"

said Tommy Smith. He was only just beginning to believe his own.

"Well," said the father dabchick, "and what do you think of it?"

"Oh, I do think it clever," Tommy Smith answered. "Do you always hide like that, Mr. Dabchick, when you don't want people to see you?"

"When I want to see them, I do," said the father dabchick. "That is the chief idea. Otherwise a dabchick can always get away."

"It is not easy to catch us," said the mother dabchick.

"Or to find our eggs," said the father dabchick. "And talking of that, I may as well take my turn now with our last."

"I fear it will not hatch," said the mother dabchick. "However, there is nothing like perseverance."

"I know that is *your* motto, my love," said the father dabchick, and he began to swim towards the nest. When he was a little way off it, all at once he dived, and coming up with a good piece of weed in his bill, laid it on the nest; and this he did several times in succession.

"It wants repairing," the mother dabchick explained. "A dabchick's nest, you know, is given to sinking down in the water."

"But is that how you make your nest?" asked Tommy Smith.

"To be sure it is," the mother dabchick answered, "and a very good way too, *I* think."

This was quite a new idea of a bird's nest to Tommy Smith, and it surprised him very much. "What!" he said, "then does the whole of your nest come up from the bottom of the water?"

"Most certainly it does," said the mother dabchick. "You see the water makes things soft, and we like to make our nest of soft materials."

"It must be a great trouble," said Tommy Smith.

"It is a great *pleasure*," said the mother dabchick. "We both of us like doing it very much."

"It would be curious if we did not," said the father dabchick. "What should a bird like better than building its nest?"

"But I thought it was so—so laborious," said Tommy Smith, remembering the word. "It is what they always say in the natural-history books, you know."

"Oh, dear!" cried the mother dabchick. "They must know a great deal about it. It must be a funny bird, *I* think, who would not enjoy making her nest. I only know of one such myself, and *she* is a disgrace."

"Oh, that's the cuckoo," said Tommy Smith, "but——"

"Sh!" said the father dabchick. "No respectable bird speaks of *her*."

"Oh, but——" Tommy Smith was beginning, but the mother dabchick ruffled her feathers and began to swim away.

"I have three young children," she said, "and they are all of them very precocious."

"Oh, I won't talk about her, really," said Tommy Smith.

"It is best to forget such things," said the mother dabchick, swimming a little more slowly. "However, business is business, and so——"

"Good-bye," said the father dabchick, quite suddenly; and as he said so, there was a little splash in the water, and he was gone.

"Good-bye," said the mother dabchick.

"Oh, but don't go, please," said Tommy Smith.

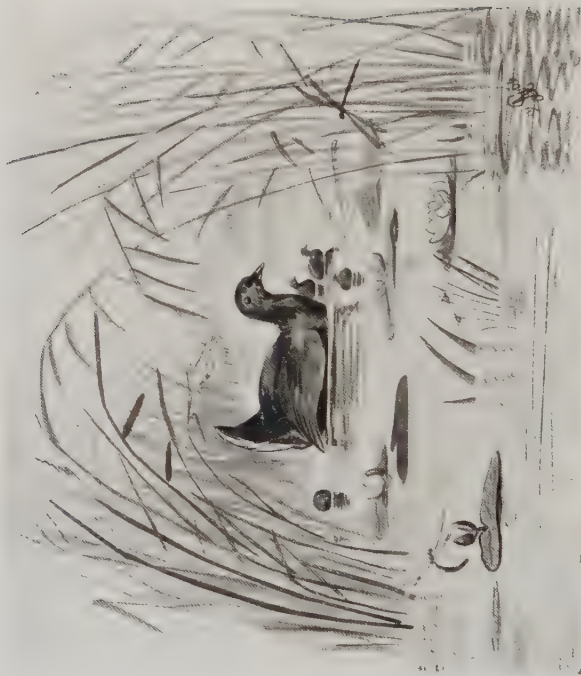
But the mother dabchick was gone too, with her chicks on her back, so, as they had both said good-bye to him, Tommy Smith began to walk home.

"I hope they weren't offended," he thought to himself, "and they didn't ask me to promise anything. But then they hide their eggs so cleverly, and, besides, all the animals know that I should never think of hurting them now."

CHAPTER VIII

THE MOORHEN

TOMMY SMITH had not got very far from where he had been talking to the dabchicks, when he saw another bird which he knew directly, for he had often seen it before, much oftener than he had the dabchick, for the dabchick is quite a small bird, and is very clever at keeping itself out of the way. This other bird was the moorhen, which is a shy bird too, but it is bigger, as well as commoner than the dabchick, and so it is more often seen. It came swimming out of the reeds, straight towards Tommy Smith, and at every stroke it made, its head bobbed forwards, and then back again, in a funny little nid-nodding way. Tommy Smith was quite accustomed to seeing it nod like this, but now all at once it seemed as if it was nodding to him—which was quite a new idea—and as it got close he felt quite sure it was. The rule is, when one feels quite sure about a thing, to ask whether it really is



"ARE YOU NODDING AT ME, MR. MOORHEN?"

so, so Tommy Smith felt obliged to say, "Are you nodding at me, Mr. Moorhen?"

"Certainly I am," said the moorhen. "Perhaps you would like to know why."

"Oh, yes—why?" said Tommy Smith, though he felt that he knew without asking.

"Why, because I know you, to be sure," the moorhen answered. "People always nod to each other when they know each other, you know."

"Not always," said Tommy Smith. "Sometimes they——"

"At any rate, when one nods," the moorhen went on, "the other *ought* to nod back again, unless he doesn't want to know him, that's to say."

Of course Tommy Smith nodded to the moorhen when he heard him say this, and the moorhen looked very pleased when he had done so.

"Now, we are on familiar terms," he said, as he gave his feathers a little ruffle, "and we can have a nice easy conversation."

"But, Mr. Moorhen," said Tommy Smith, "you didn't always know me, you know, and I have seen you bobbing your head in just the same way when there was nobody to nod to. At least *I* didn't see any one."

"I daresay not," said the moorhen, "but it doesn't follow that there was nobody there. One has one's acquaintance, you know, but little boys are not expected to see into reed-beds."

"Oh, perhaps you were nodding to the dabchick," said Tommy Smith.

"I was *not*," said the moorhen very decidedly. "We are not even on bowing terms."

"Do you mean that you don't like him?" said Tommy Smith.

"I have reason not to," said the moorhen. "A nice pair of birds, indeed, to pretend to be scandalised about the cuckoo, and to do what *they* do!"

"Oh, Mr. Moorhen," cried Tommy Smith, "then were you listening when I was talking to the dabchicks? I don't call that right, you know."

"You will when I have exposed them," said the moorhen. "Not that I was listening, but I happened to go by amongst the reeds. However, they are a pair of impostors, but first there must be some corroborative testimony. Of course you know what *that* means?"

"Not quite," said Tommy Smith. They were very long words certainly, and whenever Tommy Smith had heard his father use them

he had been reading the newspapers. "But what can a moorhen know about the newspapers?" he thought. There was only one way to find out that, so he made haste to ask, "What do they mean?" Mr. Moorhen.

"Why," said the moorhen, "when I say a thing, and somebody else says just the same as I do, that is corroborative testimony."

Tommy Smith could not help wondering how two such long words could mean such a very little thing. But he had no time to ask about it, for as the moorhen finished speaking, he gave his head a little jerk upwards, and made one of the most extraordinary noises that Tommy Smith had ever heard. It was *something* like a purr, but very loud and with a sort of brazen clang in it, such as a trumpet has. If one can imagine a trumpet purring, but only once, and all of a sudden, that would be something like the noise which the moorhen made.

Of course Tommy Smith jumped. It would have been impossible not to. "Oh, whatever did you do that for, Mr. Moorhen?" he cried—"unless it was to call your wife and family," he added, for he thought he saw the reeds beginning to move a little way off, as if another moorhen was coming through them.

"It *was* to call my wife," said the moorhen, "but how did you know that I was the husband? It might have been my wife calling me, you know."

"Oh, but I knew you were a cock bird, Mr. Moorhen," said Tommy Smith, "because of your beautiful red beak. A hen moorhen's beak, you know, is only—— Oh, but that is another cock moorhen," cried Tommy Smith all of a sudden, as he saw that a second bird, which had just come up, had a beautiful scarlet beak too.

"You had better take care what you say," said the cock moorhen, and then turning to his wife, who looked quite upset, he said, "Well, my dear, what have you to say to that?"

"*Well*," said the hen moorhen—for she was really a hen—"all I can say is that if it wasn't a little boy, who knows no better——"

"But are you both alike, Mr. Moorhen?" asked Tommy Smith.

"Exactly," said the cock moorhen, "and we think each other very handsome."

"*You* are, my dear," said the hen moorhen, as she looked at her husband.

"Not at all," answered the cock moorhen, "but I am sure *you* are."

Tommy Smith was quite surprised. "But

what are the moorhens that have not a red bill at all?" he asked. "I have often seen them with a sort of brownish-green one, and I always thought they were the hens."

"Oh, those are only the young birds," said the cock moorhen. "They will get their red bills next summer, and then they will all look like us."

So here was something quite new to Tommy Smith. He had always thought that the crimson bill of the moorhen showed it to be a cock bird, and he had often wondered why there were so many more cocks than hens; but now he found that he had been making a mistake.

"And now," said the cock moorhen, "let us proceed to business. We have come to expose a bird who pretended to be shocked at something another bird did, but which does just the same thing itself, or, at any rate, almost the same."

"Quite the same, as far as it goes," said the hen moorhen. "The cuckoo, you know, lays its eggs in another bird's nest. Now, if you take another bird's nest so that it can't lay its eggs in it itself, that comes to just the same thing. Doesn't it?"

Tommy Smith did not quite know what answer to make to this question. He did not feel sure enough about it to say "Yes," and if he said "No" he was afraid the moorhens would be angry. So instead of saying either, he asked a question himself. "But does the dabchick really take your nest, Mrs. Moorhen?" he said.

"Why, there is the nest," said the hen moorhen, swimming up to something which Tommy Smith could just see amongst the reeds, "and if they have sat there once, and their chicks with them, they have done so a dozen times at least. Haven't they, my dear?"

"Most certainly," said the cock moorhen. "That is corroborative testimony."

"Some of our children are old enough to give evidence too," said the hen moorhen, "if I knew where to find them. They have been turned out often, when we were not there to take their part."

"If we *had* been——" said the cock moorhen. "But one can't be everywhere, and we have our second family to attend to."

Tommy Smith was quite surprised to hear the moorhens talking of their children, and even of a second family, in this way, after what

they had just told him. "Why, Mr. Moorhen," he said, "I thought you said the dabchicks took your nest so that you were not able to lay your eggs in it, and if——"

"We weren't able to in that nest," said the hen moorhen. "That is to say, I was not."

"But have you two nests then?" said Tommy Smith.

"Two!" cried the hen moorhen. "Why, we have sometimes half a dozen."

"It is quite true," said the cock moorhen, for Tommy Smith was looking very surprised indeed.

"But do you lay your eggs in all of them?" he said at last.

"Oh, dear me, no," said the hen moorhen. "We have one for our eggs, and the others are just to sit in, when we want to, for a change, you know. And so as we can't sit in them all at the same time, and have to be mostly where our eggs are, that horrid little bird takes advantage of us, and sits in one or other of our nests whenever he wants to."

"I don't see what harm he does you, if that is all," said Tommy Smith, "and as for comparing him to the cuckoo, I think that is nonsense. The cuckoo, you know, lays its eggs in another bird's nest and doesn't sit on them

at all, but if the dabchick only just sits in a nest you are not using——”

“There’s no knowing what it may come to in time,” said the cock moorhen.

“And besides,” said the hen moorhen, “we have a perfect right to the nests which we have built.”

“But why do you build so many?” asked Tommy Smith.

“Oh, just to amuse ourselves,” said the cock moorhen, “and to sit in them when we want to. It is nice to have several residences, you know, and there is nothing more pleasant than building a nest.”

“The dabchick said that too,” said Tommy Smith, “and the blackbird certainly looked as if *she* was enjoying herself; so perhaps the natural-history books *are* wrong when they talk as if it were such a trouble for a bird to build its nest. After all, it builds it for itself, which is not like a housebuilder, and if it *were* such a trouble, why should it build it at all? I think animals must like doing what they do do, because there is no master to make them if they felt disinclined to.”

Tommy Smith was not exactly speaking to the moorhens when he said all this, and indeed after the first word or two he did not so much

say it as think it. So it was no wonder, perhaps, that the moorhens became just a little impatient, and at last the hen one said, "Well, if there is nothing further, and you don't want to ask us any questions——"

"He doesn't seem to," said the cock moorhen, "so now that we have exposed the dab-chicks perhaps we had better go."

"Oh, don't go, Mr. Moorhen," said Tommy Smith.

"We were *going* to show you our chief nest, with the young ones in it," said the hen moorhen.

"If you cared about seeing it," the cock moorhen added.

"Oh, do show it me," cried Tommy Smith. "I should so like to."

So the moorhens began swimming along the bank of the river, and Tommy Smith followed them till they came to a thick clump of rushes quite close to the bank, which Tommy Smith had passed on his way, without seeing anything, and as soon as they had disappeared into the rushes, they called out, both together, "There it is!" and almost the next step he made Tommy Smith saw the nest, for of course it was easy to see with a moorhen on each side of it. It was a beautiful nest, like

a round basket made of green rushes, but there was something inside it which Tommy Smith thought much more beautiful—indeed he hardly looked at the nest at all—and that was a whole basketful of little black moorhen chicks, lying all close together, and looking as snug and cosy as could be. “Oh, what dear little things!” he cried, as he stooped down and stroked them, for the nest was as near as that, almost touching the bank, in fact. “Oh, what dear little things! They are all over black fluff, or hair—it is almost like hair—and what pretty little bills they have. Oh, but they are red,” he said, all of a sudden, “and you told me they were brown, Mr. Moorhen.”

“They will be, after a little,” said the father moorhen, “but they are red now.”

“Yes,” said the mother moorhen, as she stretched her neck over the rim of the nest, and fondled her little ones with her bill. “They have three colours and two changes—from red to green—for it is green, *I* say, and not brown—and then from green to red again. But the last red is not the same as the first. It is brighter, like ours, you know, so that they become more and more beautiful.”

“I wonder they don’t get brighter gradually,” said Tommy Smith, as he looked at the little

moorhens' beaks. "It seems funny they should be green in between."

"It is most odd," said the mother moorhen. "All I can think of when I see a thing like that happening to a child of mine, is that it is born to be something remarkable."

"But if it happens to all of them——" said Tommy Smith.

"Why, then they are all born to be something remarkable," said the mother moorhen. "That is a simple calculation."

"If you never had a more difficult sum set you to do than *that*," said the father moorhen, "I should think you would always get them right."

"But if every moorhen——" Tommy Smith was beginning.

"Oh, we are not setting sums now, you know," said the father moorhen, and the mother moorhen remarked at the same time, "And now, perhaps, you would like to see my little ones swim a little. Come, my dears!" And almost before he knew where he was, the little moorhen that Tommy Smith had been holding had jumped out of his hand, and the rest were scuttling and scrambling over the edge of the nest, and in a second, almost, there was the whole family in the water.

"Oh, how well they swim!" cried Tommy Smith, as the little moorhens followed their parents in and out amongst the rushes, keeping close to them on either side. "But why don't you give them a ride on your backs, Mrs. Moorhen?" he asked, as he remembered the dabchicks. "That is what the mother dabchick always does, and sometimes the father dabchick does too."

"We should be sorry to take *them* for examples," said the mother moorhen. "Ride on our backs, indeed! That is a vulgar kind of amusement. *Our* children can swim."

"Oh, but so can the little dabchicks," said Tommy Smith. "Only——"

"Only they like riding better," said the father moorhen. "That is dabchick nature all over. They are a lazy set. They steal other people's nests, and ride on other people's backs."

"Oh, but only the little ones," said Tommy Smith, "and then they only ride on their mother's or father's. Their parents give them rides, you know, and that is not being lazy."

"It is a want of firm principle," said the father moorhen. "We encourage *our* little ones to be brisk and active."

"You saw how they jumped out of the nest

just now, the instant I spoke," said the mother moorhen. "There was no waiting, or wanting to ride on my back. There they were at once, in the water."

"Obedience and wholesome discipline. That is what *we* believe in," said the father moorhen. "And now, if you like, you may see another example of *our* principles, for here come their elder brothers and sisters."

And all at once Tommy Smith saw three moorhens that looked almost big enough to be grown up, but with brown beaks instead of red ones, walking over a platform of long, flowering weeds, that lay like a lovely white carpet on the face of the water.

The little moorhens did not wait for the bigger ones to come and join them, but were up on the carpet in a moment, and running to meet them, with their parents just behind them, so that there were the two families, with the mother and father, all together—a pretty sight to see amongst the green rushes and the soft white flowers.

"Oh, so here you are," said the father moorhen, as he met the newcomers. "The little ones are hungry by this time." And, as he said this, one of the quite little moorhens made a jump up to the beak of one of the elder ones,

and, to Tommy Smith's great surprise, the elder brother or sister — for there was no saying which they were — fed the younger one with a little weed which it had picked up in its bill, just as if it had been the mother or father. Of course the other two big ones began to feed two other little ones as well— there was no reason why only one should— and the father and mother took their share in the work, and did it a little better, as was only right and natural.

“There!” said the mother moorhen, after first one chick had been fed and then another, till they had all of them had something, “that is our plan. We like our children to be useful, so, as they grow up, we teach them to take their part in the household economy.”

“Then when they have children of their own,” said the father moorhen, “they will know the better what to do with them. Well, and what do you think of our ways?”

“Oh, I like them very much,” said Tommy Smith, “and I never saw anything so curious before. I always thought it was only the parent birds that fed their young; I never knew that the big chicks fed the little ones as well.”

“That is *our* idea,” said the father moorhen. “It is a rather more sensible one, *I* think, than

that of children riding on their parents' backs. There is nothing respectful about that."

"But do other young birds feed their brothers and sisters?" asked Tommy Smith.

"None that I know," said the father moorhen. "They are not brought up on such a sensible system as ours are. Then, of course, some must be older than others, to begin with. Now we moorhens lay some more eggs and have a second family before the first one is out of the nest. Then the little ones begin to grow up with the big ones, and it is easy, under those circumstances, to teach the big ones to feed them. So you see that is *our* system, and I hope you think it a better one than making one's children lazy by taking them about on one's back—a disreputable sort of thing, *I* think."

"Self-help," said the mother moorhen. "We believe in *that*. But, gracious me, why, where can all my family have got to?" For whilst Tommy Smith had been asking questions of the father moorhen, and the father moorhen had been answering them, the chicks, who had had enough to eat, had got away into the reeds, and the mother moorhen had not noticed it, as she had been listening to the conversation.

"Not that they can't take care of themselves, small as they are," she continued, "and besides,

they have the elder ones with them. However——” And as she said “however,” the mother moorhen got away into the reeds herself, and then Tommy Smith heard a funny little clucking note something like that a hen makes when she walks about with her chickens.

“She is calling the children,” said the father moorhen, “and as soon as she has found them I suppose she will call me. Meanwhile, let us get clear ideas on some points of importance. After what you have seen, I suppose you admit that it would be a highly reprehensible thing to steal a moorhen’s egg if ever you were in a position to do so.”

“Oh, yes,” said Tommy Smith, “and I never mean to now.”

“And as for shooting a moorhen, when you grow up, I suppose you would rather be shot yourself than do such a dreadfully wicked thing. Well, what is your answer?”

“Oh, I don’t mean to shoot at all when I grow up,” said Tommy Smith.

“That is near enough,” said the moorhen. “Good-bye.”

For all at once there was another wonderful note from the rushes, and the father moorhen gave a little flirt with his tail, and was off to join his wife and family.

CHAPTER IX

THE WOODPECKER

IT was a beautiful morning, and Tommy Smith had been taking a walk in the woods. All at once there was a sound like a loud laugh amongst the trees overhead, and then a splendid green bird, with a crimson crest of feathers on the top of its head, glanced amongst the branches, and came down on a tree quite close to Tommy Smith. But it was not a branch of the tree that this bird came down on, as most birds do when they settle in one, but right on the trunk, where it hung quite easily, just as easily as another bird sits perched on a bough.

“Oh,” cried Tommy Smith, “I know that bird. It is the green woodpecker.” I hope it has come to have a talk with me, for I should like to know more about it than I do.” As he said this to himself he set off running to the tree, but when he got there—it was not very far—there was no woodpecker to be seen,

though he had kept his eyes fixed on the place, and had not seen it fly away.

"Where can it be?" thought Tommy Smith, as he stood under the tree and looked up.

"Why, here I am," said a voice, not so very far above his head, and there was the woodpecker looking out of a little round hole in the trunk of the tree—which Tommy Smith had not noticed directly, because a branch had been in his way—just as we might look out of a window.

"Oh, Mr. Woodpecker," said Tommy Smith, "so that is your nest, I suppose."

"Of course it is," said the woodpecker, "and if you could look inside it you would see the prettiest sight that you ever did see, for all the children are there, and there is nothing like a young woodpecker for beauty."

"Oh, I should like to see them," said Tommy Smith. He knew it was impossible, but that made him want to all the more. "How pretty they must look in their little green coats and their red caps."

"Oh, they're not like that yet," said the woodpecker. "A young woodpecker's feathers are brown all over. They get their official suits later."

"Their official suits?" said Tommy Smith, not knowing quite what the woodpecker meant.

"Yes," said the woodpecker. "We woodpeckers, you know, belong to the order of foresters, and its badge is a green coat and red cap, as you say—it is not really a crest, you know. But our children are not old enough to wear the uniform yet. They will have to go out into the forest before they can be really foresters. They have not even got their brown suit yet, which is the first step in their promotion."

"I suppose they are all over fluff now," said Tommy Smith, "and that must make them pretty. Oh, I do wish——"

"You can't climb this tree," said the woodpecker, "and even if you could you would not be able to see into our nest. As for fluff, however, our children are not dressed in that way. We do not believe in coddling them."

"But how are they dressed?" said Tommy Smith.

"They are not dressed at all yet," the woodpecker answered, "and they will be naked for some time. We practise the hardening system. Foresters, you know, should be hardy."

It seemed to Tommy Smith that without either fluff or feathers the young woodpeckers could not be so *very* pretty; but it was evident the woodpecker thought quite otherwise, for its

very next remark was, "Yes, it is a pity you can't see them, for there is nothing in the world quite so lovely as a group of young woodpeckers before their feathers have sprouted."

"I suppose you are the mother woodpecker," said Tommy Smith. He did not know why, but somehow he felt quite sure that she was.

"Yes," said the mother woodpecker—for Tommy Smith was quite right—"and I have just been feeding my children. My husband does that as well as I, though. He is a very good father. You would not be able to distinguish us in that way, but perhaps you know that I have a black patch of feathers on each side of my face, whereas he has a red one."

"I didn't know that," said Tommy Smith, "but I can see the black patches now."

"If you didn't know it," said the mother woodpecker, "I don't know how you knew which of the two I was, for that is the only difference between us."

"We agree in every other respect," said the father woodpecker, as he flew in, all of a sudden, and settled just under the hole in the tree, that his wife was looking out of. "Not all married couples can say as much as that, you know," he continued, and then there was a loud laugh and a flash of crimson and green, as

the mother woodpecker darted out of the hole, and flew away.

Tommy Smith was quite startled. "What a funny note you woodpeckers have," he said. "Why, it is like a laugh."

"Oh, she had to laugh," said the father woodpecker. "It was what I said, you know, but it is not everybody who has such an appreciative wife."

This was quite a new idea to Tommy Smith, but before he could make up his mind what to think of it, the woodpecker said, "You must excuse me till I come out again. I came to feed my children, you know, and they will be getting impatient." And he was down the hole almost before he had finished speaking. It was not so very long before out came his head again, just as the mother woodpecker's had done, and then Tommy Smith had a question all ready for him.

"What did you feed your young with, Mr. Woodpecker?" he said. "I didn't see any insects in your bill, and I thought woodpeckers lived on insects."

"So they do," the woodpecker answered, "and I have been feeding my young with them too. You call ants insects, I suppose."

"Ants!" said Tommy Smith. "Oh, yes, but

they are so small. One would be nothing, and I don't see how you could hold a lot of them in your bill. That would be impossible, I think."

"That's why I don't do it," said the woodpecker, "but I feed them on ants, all the same. You see, I swallow them first."

"Oh, then, do you bring them up again like a pigeon?" said Tommy Smith, "I mean like a pigeon does grain."

"To be sure I do," the woodpecker answered. "Look here." And as he said "Look here," Tommy Smith noticed that something was coming out of his bill, but it looked a very curious sort of something, and not in the least like ants. It was white—as white as milk, Tommy Smith thought—but thicker, so that it looked more like a sort of paste. Just a little of this thick, pasty-looking substance oozed out from the woodpecker's beak, and then disappeared inside it again, so that Tommy Smith had not much time to look at it, and besides he was not very near.

"There," said the woodpecker, "that is how we feed our little ones. The ants come up from inside us, and they are much nicer like that."

"But it doesn't look like ants at all," said Tommy Smith.

"I daresay, if you had gone through what

they have," said the woodpecker, "you would not look like a little boy at all. However, that is all I can tell you about it. I swallow the ants—on that point I can speak with certainty—and when I go to feed my young ones they come up in that state."

"But why do you eat such a lot of ants, Mr. Woodpecker?" asked Tommy Smith.

"Why, because I like them," said the woodpecker, "and if that is not a good enough reason you must ask my wife, because *I* must go and eat some more." And again there was the funny laugh, as the woodpecker flew away.

But it was just the same as if he had not gone at all, for almost as he flew out of the hole, there was the mother woodpecker underneath it again, and in a very little while she was looking out and waiting for Tommy Smith to say something, so that it seemed as if there had been no change at all.

"Something about ants, I think, you were saying," said the mother woodpecker.

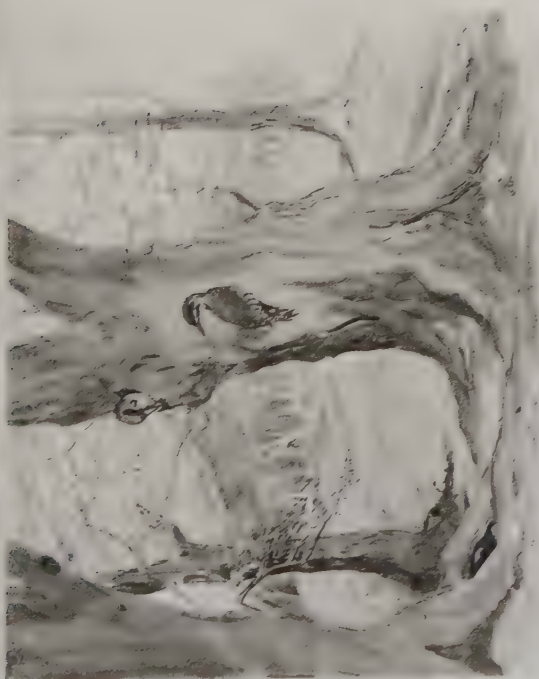
"Oh, yes," said Tommy Smith. "I was wondering how it was that you ate such a lot of them, so as to feed your young ones in the way you do instead of bringing them different kinds of insects in your beak like other birds, because you know ants are not always on

trees, and I thought a woodpecker lived on insects that it picked off the trunks of the trees it was in."

"Oh, we do that too," said the mother woodpecker, "and we have the most wonderful tongue to do it with that any bird in the world has. Perhaps you would like to see it?"

"Oh, I would very much, Mrs. Woodpecker," said Tommy Smith, and, in an instant, the mother woodpecker was out of the hole and coming backwards down the tree-trunk, in a very funny way, not in a straight line and without stopping, as a person comes down a ladder, but sideways and in so many little jerks, with a pause between each one. Generally she went first to one side and then another, as she came down, but once she went all round the tree.

"There!" she said, as she stopped just in front of Tommy Smith, "now, look," and out shot something that looked more like a javelin than a tongue, for it was wonderfully long, and ended in a barbed point like an arrow-head. It was rounded, too, as the shaft of a spear is, and got more and more slender towards the point. "There!" said the mother woodpecker, "that is the spear that I spear insects with, and if you would like to see



"NOW, LOOK!"

me spear one there is a caterpillar there—just in that chink of the bark—that will do very well. Do you see it? You mustn't keep me waiting, you know." And before Tommy Smith *could* see it, out shot the spear again, and as it came back there was a caterpillar on the end of it.

"There!" said the mother woodpecker, as she swallowed the caterpillar, "perhaps you don't call that clever."

"Oh, yes, I do," said Tommy Smith. He had been too interested to say anything before. "I call it very clever indeed, and I have never seen such a wonderful tongue, unless——" He was just going to say "unless the frog's or the toad's are as wonderful," but he thought he would not, as he felt sure the woodpecker would not agree to this. So he stopped himself, and only said, "I wish you would do it again, Mrs. Woodpecker".

"If there were another caterpillar where I am, I would," said the woodpecker. "But I have no time to look about now, for here comes my husband, so I must go and get some more ants."

"You may go with her if you like," said the father woodpecker, as he flew on to the tree again; "only you will have to make haste."

And off Tommy Smith started, wondering why the mother woodpecker did not look for some ants on the tree where she was, instead of flying to another one. But the mother woodpecker did not fly to a tree at all, but right out of the wood, and then she came down on the smooth slope of a grassy hill only a little way beyond it. "A very promising ant-hill," she said, as Tommy Smith came running up, quite out of breath. "With your permission we will commence excavations."

Tommy Smith could not help thinking that the mother woodpecker had commenced excavations already, for there were one or two holes in the little brown heap that looked just the size of her beak, and some ants were running about quite near them, and did not look at all comfortable. But if she *had* commenced before, she was quite ready to commence again, and as Tommy Smith stood panting and too much out of breath to say anything, she bent down her head and began to probe with her beak in the loose soil of the ant-hill. She did this quite gently at first, but afterwards, when she had made her little tunnel into the nest, her bill went up and down in it as if it was the head of a hammer, and then she began to throw earth out of the hole, first to one side

and then the other, so quickly that it seemed to Tommy Smith as if her head was going round and round. "There!" she said at last, as she stopped for a moment, "that will have stirred them up nicely, and the angrier they are the better they always taste."

"Do they really?" said Tommy Smith, for this seemed to him rather funny.

"Perhaps it may be fancy," said the woodpecker, "but I have often heard my husband say that an angry ant has always the finest flavour. But excuse me. Business is business, and my children will be getting hungry again." And with this the mother woodpecker plunged her beak into the hole again and kept it there for a little while. Then when she drew it out she threw up her head into the air, and it was easy for Tommy Smith to see that she was enjoying something very much. Then down went her head again, and there was the same thing several times over. "Delicious!" she said at last, as she stopped and looked at Tommy Smith. "What a pleasure for my children when I get back to them. Well, good-bye."

"It is nice to do things for one's children," said a voice in the air, and then there were two loud laughs, as the mother woodpecker flew

away to the tree, and her husband settled just where she had been—it was so sudden that Tommy Smith gave quite a jump. The father woodpecker began eating ants directly, and it was not till he had said "Delicious!" for the third or fourth time that his manner gave any encouragement to commence a conversation. After that Tommy Smith thought he might venture, so he began with "Please, Mr. Woodpecker——"

"I can't stop many minutes," said the father woodpecker, "so if you have any question of real importance you had better ask it directly. Our little foresters there are as fond of ants as we are, and after having had such a pleasure oneself it would not be fair to keep them waiting."

"Don't you feed them a good deal?" said Tommy Smith.

"If we didn't we shouldn't feed them enough," said the father woodpecker. "You see there are six of them, and they all want as much as they can get. Well, was that the important question?"

"No," said Tommy Smith, "at least——"

"Well?" said the woodpecker.

"What I want to know, Mr. Woodpecker," said Tommy Smith, after thinking a minute, "is

why you feed on the ground so much, and eat so many ants instead of other insects, and why you catch them in their nests instead of on the trunks of trees—I mean when you see any there—because, you know, you have a tongue made on purpose to do that with, and I always thought that woodpeckers lived in trees and never walked about on the ground.”

“Well,” said the woodpecker, “you were right on the whole, but there are exceptions to every rule. Most of our family do live in that way, but our ideas are less confined. We are not so conservative, and have no objection to making a new departure when it is of advantage to do so. In fact we are broader-minded. Most families have their bright member, you know, and we green woodpeckers represent the brains in ours. We have found out how much simpler and more satisfactory it is to eat ants by the hundred and bring them up again when our children want them, than to catch just one insect and then another, and carry them to the nest in our beaks. That is a tedious affair, but as for catching an insect in trees when we want to, we can do that just as well as our less progressive relations. I should like to see the insect that could get out of our way. So now you understand, I hope.”

"Oh, yes, Mr. Woodpecker, I think I do," said Tommy Smith, for he did not feel quite sure about it, the woodpecker had used so many long words.

"Good-bye," said the woodpecker.

But Tommy Smith had thought of something else. "Oh, Mr. Woodpecker," he cried, "I do wish I could see you make your little round hole in the trunk of a tree. I have often seen it, but I have never seen you making it."

"You are too late for that now," said the woodpecker. "We are feeding our young ones. . Nest-making time has been over for a long while. However, if just to see the way in which it is done would be sufficient—but you must make haste."

And off the woodpecker flew, but instead of going straight back to his children, he stopped and settled on the first tree that he came to, just on the skirts of the wood. Of course Tommy Smith ran after him as fast as he could, and as he ran he heard "tap, tap, tap," getting louder and louder the nearer he got. When he came to the tree there was the woodpecker hammering with his beak on the trunk, so quickly that sometimes it looked as if he had two heads instead of one—as it does when you wave a stick from side to side—and little

chips of wood were flying about in all directions.

"There," he said, "that is the way we do it." Tap, tap, tap—tap, tap, tap, tap, tap—and the bill went faster than ever.

"Oh, dear," said the voice of the mother woodpecker all of a sudden—there was just a little laugh this time—"I thought I heard something. Why, this is quite like old times. I must take my share though." And then there was tap, tap, tap, louder than ever, the chips flew still faster, and there seemed to be four heads now instead of two.

"There!" said the mother woodpecker, stopping at last. "It is very pleasant, but we must wait till next year. We have other duties now, you know, dear."

"I was giving Tommy Smith a little treat," said the father woodpecker. "He wanted to see how we made our nest, so I thought I would indulge him."

"And I thought I would help you," said the mother woodpecker. "Well, and what has Tommy Smith to say?"

"Oh, thank you," said Tommy Smith, for of course there was only one thing. "It was so kind of you both," he added, "but I wish I could see the inside of the real nest. I sup-

pose the tree is hollow, and the hole leads into the hollow part."

"Not at all," said the father woodpecker. "There is no hollow part for it to lead into."

"Nothing hollow about *our* matrimonial arrangements," said the mother woodpecker. "We choose a tree with nice soft wood, and then we make a long tunnel in it, with a comfortable room at the end, where we lay our eggs."

"Unless a starling takes it," said the father woodpecker.

"Life has its crosses," said the mother woodpecker. "But, my dear, the children are waiting."

"Oh, dear, so they are," said the father woodpecker; and he was off even without saying good-bye.

"Perhaps you would like to see me eat some more ants," said the mother woodpecker. "If so, you will know where to find me." And she was off too.

But Tommy Smith had his own dinner to eat, so he thought he would come and watch the woodpeckers eating theirs some other time.

CHAPTER X

THE FOX

ALL the time Tommy Smith was eating his dinner, he kept thinking about the woodpeckers, and he felt sorry now that he had not stayed a little longer and asked them a few more questions. "There would have been just time," he thought to himself, "and I might have found out something about the starling taking the woodpecker's nest. If ever I have a conversation with the starling I shall ask him about that, because, of course, one ought to hear both sides of a question." Tommy Smith had often heard his father say this, so he said it very decidedly. But then he remembered that he had not heard the woodpecker's side yet—at least not properly—and he decided that the best thing to do would be to go back to the tree where they had made their nest—he felt sure he could find it—directly after dinner. So Tommy Smith did

the best thing, or, at least, he tried to. He went to the wood, which he knew quite well, and then walked straight to what he thought was the tree, but it was not the tree at all, and no woodpecker's hole was to be seen in it. It was the same with a second and then a third tree, and now there was no other one that Tommy Smith thought he remembered. Still he felt sure that it was somewhere quite near, and the best thing, he thought, now was to go from one tree to another, till he came to one with a woodpecker's hole, and that would most likely be the one he was looking for. So Tommy Smith began to do the best thing again—twice in so short a time was really remarkable—but no tree that he looked at had any woodpecker's hole in it, and after a time he got quite tired of looking any longer.

"What a bother!" he said at last. "I shall never find it now."

"Then why try?" said a voice quite close to him, and at the same time he noticed a very disagreeable smell which he had sometimes smelt before, but never so strongly.

"Oh," he cried, "why, who can that be?"

"Only I," said the same voice from the same place. "It can't be any one else."

Tommy Smith looked very hard at the

place from which the voice came, which was not more than a few yards in front of him, but there was only a piece of brown, withered bramble, or something of that sort, lying amidst the dead leaves, and that was too small to conceal anything except a quite small animal, and the voice had not seemed to belong to a very small one. Still he thought he would walk up to it, and he was just going to, when, all at once, he saw two yellow eyes fixed upon him, and then—it was just like magic—the piece of bramble, and a good many of the dead leaves too, changed into a fox, which was lying flat on the ground, at full length, and looking up at him with a very crafty expression.

As soon as the fox saw that Tommy Smith had seen him—and as Tommy Smith gave a jump and cried “Oh!” it was quite easy to see that he had—he jumped up and sat on his haunches. “Well,” he said, “now that you see me, I suppose you know who I am.”

“Oh, yes,” said Tommy Smith, feeling half frightened. It was such a large animal, and his reputation was not good. “You are the fox, I know.”

“There is not much doubt as to that,” the fox answered. “Only a fox could perfume the

air in the way I am doing. You are enjoying it, I know."

"Ye-es," said Tommy Smith. "That is——"

"That *is* an enjoyment!" said the fox, but he looked as if he knew quite well that Tommy Smith felt afraid to say what he really thought. "It is a pity that *I* cannot return the compliment. Man-scent, unfortunately, even when it only comes from a little boy, is very objectionable. However, I have taken my precautions. The wind blows from me to you, which makes it right for both of us." The fox grinned, as he said this, as though he had some joke all to himself, and was enjoying it immensely. In grinning, of course, he showed his teeth, and this made Tommy Smith so uneasy that he didn't feel at all inclined to contradict him.

"But, of course," the fox continued, "not to smell something nasty is not quite the same thing as to smell something nice. That is one way in which you have the advantage of me, and another way in which you have it is that *you* are talking to the most cunning animal that there is. That, of course, is a great honour for you."

Tommy Smith was beginning to feel more comfortable by this time, for after all the fox seemed quite friendly, and he began to think

that he was only laughing at him. Besides, he was not so very large after all, and he had the thick stick in his hand, which he always carried. So he took courage, and said, "I daresay you are very cunning, Mr. Fox—of course, I know that you are—but as for your scent, *I* think it very disagreeable."

"Dear me!" said the fox, as he grinned again. "That is a strange opinion; you will not find many to agree with you."

"I think everybody agrees with me," said Tommy Smith.

"If they did," said the fox, "why should everybody run after it as they do? Why, you may come here, any of these days, and see a whole crowd of people—men, women, boys and even girls—all following my scent as if they were mad. Many of them ride horses, so as to follow it faster, but a whole crowd run on foot, and tire themselves almost to death, which shows how very fond of it they must be. They even have dogs to help them, and if the scent is lost for a while, and some or other of the dogs find it again, then you hear shoutings and tally-hoings and cracking of whips, and there is no end to the rejoicings. Think how fond people must be of my scent to make them go on about it in that way!"

"Oh, Mr. Fox," cried Tommy Smith, "I know that you are only joking. Those people are hunting you, and you know that very well."

"It is all about my scent, I am sure," said the fox. "You see there are ladies, and you know how soft-hearted they are. Even you, I suppose, would not deny that."

"Oh, no, Mr. Fox," said Tommy Smith. He would have thought himself wicked to deny it.

"Of course not," said the fox. "Women—and especially ladies—are very soft-hearted, aren't they?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Fox," said Tommy Smith. You see he was quite little, and had been told all the ordinary things.

"Well, then," said the fox, "do you suppose that a woman would gallop all over the country, and even have gaps made in hedges, for her to go through when there was no gate near enough, in order to see a poor animal torn to pieces by a pack of dogs, and then to have its tail cut off for her—perhaps even before it was dead?"

"Oh, but they do have the tail given them," said Tommy Smith. "I have seen a lady with it, and she looked so pleased."

"That proves what I say," said the fox. "She can't have looked pleased because she

was cruel—for ladies are not cruel, we have settled that—but only because of the scent. Ladies *are* fond of scent, you know, and of course a fox's would be in his tail after it was cut off. That is why she is pleased to have it given her, and does not mind the blood, and the fleas in it. But if the huntsman were to say, 'Here is something to remind you that an animal has been hunted to death, and that you were there to see it,' oh, how disgusted she would be!"

Tommy Smith did not quite know what to make of the fox's argument—supposing he was really serious—but at last he said, "Well, perhaps you are right about the ladies, Mr. Fox, but I am sure the men kill you because *they are* cruel. It is sport, you know."

"Oh, good gracious, yes!" said the fox. "We all know what men are. I was only defending the women." And as the fox said this, he gave a very broad grin indeed—at least it would have been broad if his muzzle had not been so narrow.

Tommy Smith was just thinking of a question to ask the fox—for up till now it had been all the other way—when all at once he got such a strong whiff of his scent that it made him feel quite uncomfortable—it was

really very nasty indeed. So he said, "I tell you what, Mr. Fox, whatever you may think about your scent, and the ladies liking it, it is too much for me; and unless I can come on the other side of you, I shall have to go on". And as he said this, he walked round to the other side of the fox, so that the wind blew his scent away from him. The fox did not seem at all angry, as Tommy Smith thought he might be, but only laughed—it was almost more than a grin this time. But when Tommy Smith had got to where he wanted, he made a sort of face, and said, "Well, I suppose I must put up with it; but it is very bad, I can tell you. Man-scent is really dreadful. However, it is not quite so dreadful with you, because you are not a man yet, and not one of the ladies. Theirs is the worst of all, you know. Sometimes, when they take out their pocket-handkerchiefs and I am on the wrong side of them, it really makes me feel ill."

"Oh, but that is the scent on their handkerchiefs, Mr. Fox," said Tommy Smith, "and it is so nice."

"Pah!" said the fox. "Pray, don't let us talk of it. *You* are bad enough."

Tommy Smith did not like this remark at

all. That the fox should have a strong scent, which was disagreeable to him as well as to other people, was quite natural, though not at all pleasant; but that *he* should have a scent too, which was disagreeable to the fox, was quite a new idea. He would have liked to think that the fox was only pretending, but he remembered that, after all, dogs did track men by their scent—quite easily too—and if it was not unpleasant to them, it might very well be so to other animals, especially to animals that men hunted. But as for what the fox had said about the ladies' pocket-handkerchiefs, Tommy Smith could not understand that at all. And yet he had made such a face when he said "Pah!" that he felt he *must* be in earnest.

"Well," said the fox, "perhaps now you would like to ask me some question."

This was just what Tommy Smith had been meaning to do, but somehow, now that the fox mentioned it, he could not think of anything very particular to ask him. The fact is that Tommy Smith could not feel at home with the fox, as he had felt with the other animals; not that he was afraid of him any more now, but still he was not quite at his ease; and when he looked into those yellow

eyes of his, with their strange expression—half-cunning, half-wicked, and seeming to know such a lot—which were always fixed upon him, it gave him a funny sort of feeling, and made him forget all that he had been going to say. That was why, instead of asking the fox something sensible, he only said at last, “Do you mind much being hunted, Mr. Fox?”

“Oh, as for me,” the fox answered, “*I* am so cunning that I have no reason to mind—except that it is rather tiresome sometimes. Nobody can catch *me*, you know. Of course, when a fox *is* caught, he minds. It is not at all nice for him then, I can tell you. All the hounds—that is to say, as many as there is room for—seize hold of him at once by different parts of his body, and then they pull and tug against one another—he minds that very much. One has him fast by the head, another by the tail, a third by the throat, neck or back, whilst three or four others have each a leg or paw in their mouths. Sometimes his nose is torn off, or his lip or tongue bitten through, or his eye bitten into and half pulled out. Or he may lose a paw, or be flayed a little before he is dead, and, besides being bitten all over, he is stretched, as though he were on the rack, only I think it is a worse rack than ever a man

or woman was on. What a sight to see! Yet it is thought a very fine thing to see it. It is called 'being in at the death,' and people who are in at it are very much complimented—especially a lady if she should be—all kinds of pretty things are said to *her*, and, as I say, she gets the tail, or what is left of it—the huntsman likes to give that to a lady. Ah, and you should see her blush and simper as she takes it. Then she trots home with it and shows it to her parents or her pet dog. The very next day, perhaps, she will have something to say about cruelty to animals; a rough man with his horse in the street—her own horse has his tail cut off—or a boy throwing stones at a cat. Oh, tender-hearted creature!" And the fox grinned quite dreadfully, and brought his red tongue curling round his flashing white teeth. He seemed to have forgotten all he had said about ladies a little while ago. It made Tommy Smith feel quite uncomfortable again.

"Oh, Mr. Fox," he said, "I think it's dreadful."

"Do you?" said the fox. "And pray, what do you think of people who go out to be in at *deaths* like that, or to help make them?"

Tommy Smith was only a little boy, and perhaps he did not quite know what he was

talking about, but what he said was, "Oh, Mr. Fox, I think they must be the cruellest wretches in the whole world".

"Bravo!" said the fox, and then he gave a very cunning look and said, "Well, I have something to tell you. There are clergymen amongst them, and some of the ladies are clergymen's daughters."

"Or their wives?" said Tommy Smith.

"Oh, their wives are usually occupied with their parish duties," said the fox, "especially going about to collect money for charitable purposes. At least, I hope they are."

"You seem to know a lot about people, Mr. Fox," said Tommy Smith.

The fox grinned again. "There are five villages within my immediate purview," he said.

"What does that mean?" said Tommy Smith.

"It is rather a funny thing," the fox remarked, "that *I* should have to teach *you* the language. However, you are not grown up yet, and do not belong to any learned society. So of course you only know words that one talks with, and not words that one writes with. What I mean is, that there are five villages quite close to where I live, and I know all about them. Oh, yes! I know something about people, and still more about people's poultry."

"Oh, Mr. Fox," cried Tommy Smith, "I'm afraid you are dreadful with the fowls. Two of ours were stolen about a month ago, and I believe it was *you* who took them."

"Let me see," said the fox, in a musing way, as if he had not heard what Tommy Smith said, "I think *your* fowl-house is on the right of the little paddock at the back of the kitchen garden. It is always locked, but sometimes a hen roosts outside in the shrubbery."

"Then you *did* take them, Mr. Fox," said Tommy Smith, "and I think you ought to be punished for it."

"A few round about is well enough," the fox continued. "But it is better when one can get in. There is so much killing then, besides what one eats."

"I think you deserve——" Tommy Smith was beginning.

"I *have* killed forty in one night," said the fox. "What do you think of that?"

Tommy Smith was quite angry by this time. "What do I think!" he said. "Why, I think you are a very wicked animal, Mr. Fox, a very wicked animal indeed!"

"Wicked!" said the fox, in a surprised tone of voice. "What, for getting my dinner?"

"Your dinner, indeed!" exclaimed Tommy

Smith. "That is a nice excuse for stealing other people's poultry."

"I can't be expected to keep my own," said the fox, "so as I am licensed to eat poultry, what else am I to do?"

"Licensed!" cried Tommy Smith.

"Of course!" said the fox. "Why, didn't you know that?"

Tommy Smith had not known it, and what was more, he didn't believe it. "Oh, nonsense, Mr. Fox," he said, and then he added, "I think you *deserve* to be hunted."

"Oh, but that is the arrangement, you know," said the fox. "I am hunted by rich people, and, in return, they allow me to eat poor people's poultry."

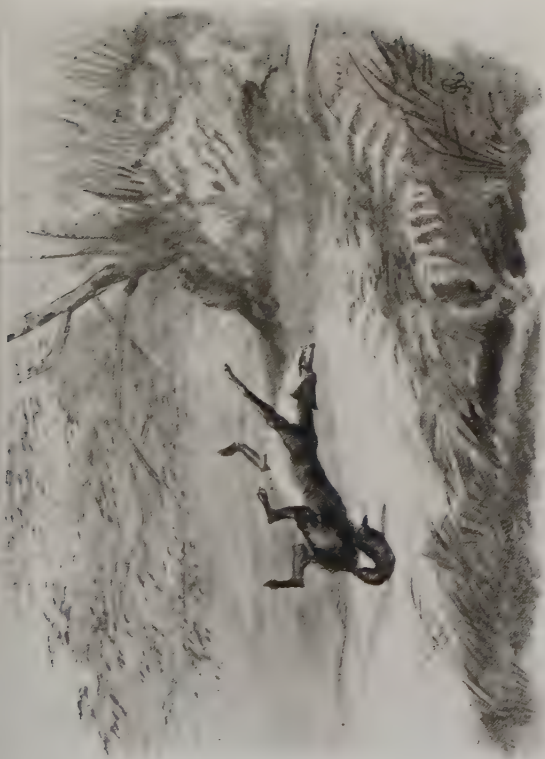
"Oh, nonsense," said Tommy Smith. "I know that that can't be true."

"Why not?" asked the fox.

"Because it would be so very unjust," said Tommy Smith. "I am sure I don't know what you are laughing about, Mr. Fox," he added, for the fox had rolled right over on his back, and was grinning in the most extraordinary manner.

"Don't you?" he said, after he had recovered himself a little. "Well, in a dozen years or so perhaps you will, only you will

THE FOX AMUSED



have to be rather precocious, and you mustn't forget this conversation. But come," the fox continued, before Tommy Smith could say what he wanted to, "perhaps you would like to know a little more about the matter. I suppose you have not heard of poultry clubs."

"Oh, yes, I have," said Tommy Smith. "But that doesn't make it right of you to kill the ducks and fowls."

"You see," said the fox, "when a poor person loses his poultry in that way, he doesn't know what to do. A rich person may hunt me with a pack of hounds, till I am caught and torn to pieces in the way I told you. Nobody thinks anything of that, but if a poor person who had lost half his fowls in one night were to watch the next night with a gun, and shoot me, that would be thought quite dreadful. If you were to ask *me*, perhaps I might prefer to be shot, but *I* am not consulted."

"But what happens if the poor person does shoot you, Mr. Fox?" asked Tommy Smith.

"Oh, then he has to pay the price of his fowls over again," said the fox. "And besides, the rich people, who are allowed to tear me to pieces, do all they can to ruin him."

"But what ought he to do?" asked Tommy Smith.

"Why, now we come to our poultry clubs," said the fox. "He goes to one of those—that is to say, if there is one—and asks for compensation—you know what that means?"

"Money for the fowls," said Tommy Smith.

"Exactly," said the fox. "Well, he asks for compensation, and by the time he has got it, he has lost so much time, and had so much trouble, and paid so many expenses in one way and another, that it would have been better for him if he had said nothing about it."

"I call that a shame," said Tommy Smith. "But is it really true, Mr. Fox?"

"Why, I heard a man say so myself," said the fox, "whose fowls I had taken three nights running. The third night *he did* bring a gun—but I took some one else's that night. I heard him say so myself as I lay against his own cottage wall, and I could give you his name and address if I liked. He was a sensible man, and knew what he was talking about—and besides, his wife agreed with him."

"I call it a shame," said Tommy Smith again.

"So you see," said the fox, "it comes to what I say—I am licensed to eat poor people's poultry, so that rich people may be able to

hunt me; because, of course, if I didn't eat poultry, I should die for want of food, and how could I be hunted then?"

"But why do you say poor people's poultry, Mr. Fox?" said Tommy Smith. "You can take the rich people's too, you know, and as it is they who hunt you, of course they couldn't object."

"Not then, perhaps," said the fox, "but they object beforehand. What I mean is, that the rich people who do keep poultry always keep it well guarded, because, you see, they *are* rich, and so they can put up nice places with strong doors and padlocks, and everything that is wanted to keep me from getting inside. But poor people have often no place at all for them, or, if they do have one, it is slight and frail—a board here and a piece of wire-netting there, put up anyhow and ready to tumble down if you give it a push—not quite the sort of thing to keep *me* out. So instead of going to the great houses where everything is firm and under lock and key, I go from one small cottage to another, and snap up a hen here, and another there, and a dozen or more somewhere else. I kill all I can, you know, whether I can eat them or not. Ah, you should hear the old cottage women sometimes—how they

go on in the morning when they find their best bird gone and a lot of others lying dead about the place, with their heads pulled off, very often."

"Oh, what a shame of you, Mr. Fox!" said Tommy Smith. "You might at least not kill more than you wanted."

"Oh, it is so nice to kill them," said the fox. "You can't think what it feels like. So you see it is poor people's poultry I live on. The rich hunt me and make the poor pay for it."

"But I think they hunt you *because* you kill such a lot of fowls, Mr. Fox," said Tommy Smith. "I feel sure I have been told that. You have to be kept down, you know."

"Oh, dear," said the fox, "you *really* should not make me grin so much. I shall be having jaw-ache, and that is very painful. Have to be kept down, have I? Why, if one were really to try to, it would be easy to get rid of all the foxes in England; and considering how we are treated here, perhaps that would really be the best thing for us. But that would not suit the fine ladies and gentlemen whose pleasure it is, all their lives, to see foxes torn to pieces by dogs from the beginning to the end of each hunting season. Having this

pleasure is what they call keeping us down, but they take care to keep us up, so that they shall be *able* to keep us down—do you see? So now, perhaps, you understand.”

Tommy Smith was not so very sure that he did—properly. He was only a little boy, and the idea of keeping a thing up, so as to be able to keep it down, was not a quite simple one. But he really had something to ask the fox now, and he was anxious to ask it. So instead of thinking any longer about difficult things, he said, “Oh, Mr. Fox, you said you were so very cunning—and I know foxes *are* very cunning—do tell me about some of the cunning things you have done, and why you are more cunning even than other foxes, because, you know, you spoke as if you were.”

“Certainly,” said the fox. “Perhaps you may not have known it, but you have been speaking all this while to *the* fox who has done all the cunning things that you have read about in the books, and some, perhaps, that you have not read about.”

“Oh, do tell me some of them,” said Tommy Smith.

“Certainly,” said the fox. “The best, perhaps, is this. For a long time, whenever I

was hunted, I used to disappear—sometimes I do now—just at the corner of a field, by an old fence, behind which there was a wood. The dogs always followed my scent up to there, but then they lost it, and it was not to be found either in the wood or along by the fence that skirted it, either in that field or the next one. Nobody could tell what had become of me, and the dogs got so accustomed to lose my scent just there, that at last they would take no more trouble, but just gave up as soon as they got to the place. It became quite a joke in the country at last, and some people thought that I was a were-fox——”

“A were-fox!” said Tommy Smith.

“Yes,” said the fox, “but that was quite an erroneous idea. If I had been a were-fox there wouldn’t have been anything in it, because a were-fox, you know, can make itself invisible whenever it likes—unsmellable too, I suppose, which would be still more useful—and there is nothing *brainy* about that. But I wasn’t a were-fox.”

“I don’t believe there is such an animal,” said Tommy Smith.

“However that may be,” said the fox, “I am not one, and I would despise a trick like that, because, as I say, there would be nothing

brainy about it. It would not really be cunning at all—and fancy me not being cunning! Oh, dear!” And the fox gave a look as if he was trying to imagine something, but found it too difficult. “No, it was not that,” he continued.

“Oh, Mr. Fox, I think I——” Tommy Smith was beginning.

“What I really did do,” said the fox, very quickly, “was this. When I got to the corner of that field, I jumped on the fence, and then ran along the top rail of it to quite a distance, till I came to a tree, in the wood, that slanted very much, so that it was easy for me to run up it—for you know foxes are not climbers, our claws are not made for that. Now this tree was hollow at the top, and it was so far from the fence that no one could suppose that I would be able to jump on to it. But I did jump on to it—such a spring!—and there I was, all safe in the hollow, and listening to the huntsmen holloaing outside, and the dogs baying and whining, and all the rest of it. Oh, how I did grin!”—the fox was grinning now as he thought of it—“especially when I heard some one say I was a were-fox and could make myself invisible. However, I had done that in my own way.”

"Oh, Mr. Fox," said Tommy Smith, "I knew what you were going to tell me. I have read all about it in a book of mine."

"Do you think I didn't know that?" said the fox. "That was why I didn't ask you what you supposed I had done, because then *you* would have told *me* instead of *my* telling *you*; but I was too cunning for that."

"How clever it was of you!" said Tommy Smith.

"Wasn't it?" said the fox. "On another occasion I was being chased by a pack of hounds, when all at once I disappeared in the middle of an open space, just as if I had been a were-fox, but, as I told you, I am not one. Now, how do you account for that?"

"Had you gone down your burrow, Mr. Fox?" asked Tommy Smith.

"Burrow, indeed!" said the fox. "Do you think I'm a rabbit? My *earth*, I presume you mean. Oh, good gracious, no. They would have found me in a minute if I had done that, and then I should have been dug out. Oh, no, I was more cunning than that. In the middle of the open space there was a large log of wood, and——"

"Oh, and you crouched down on the other side of it," said Tommy Smith.

"No, I did not," said the fox. "If I had, they would just have tracked me up to where I lay, and caught me. No, I played a much more cunning trick. I made a long jump *on* to the log, and lay flat down on it, with my fur pressed close to my body. When the hounds came up and lost the scent, they never thought of an old log of wood, but kept running round and round the clearing. I lay there all the while, looking at them, and as soon as I saw my opportunity, I crept back on my own trail without their noticing me. What do you think of *that*?"

"Oh, it was cunning of you, Mr. Fox," said Tommy Smith.

"As for crouching down by a thing," the fox continued, "I know when to do that too. Once when I was being hunted I ran to a high wall, and jumped right over it. I was in full view of the hounds at the time, but, of course, as soon as I had jumped over, they couldn't see me. I had just time to run for a little on the other side, and then back on my tracks again, and crouch down at the foot of the wall, when over came the hounds, and instead of thinking of looking for me where I was, off they went on my scent again. I let them get to about the end of it—I mean to as far as

I had run—and then jumped the wall again, whilst their tails were still turned to me, and off I went home. If *that* was not a good trick, perhaps you can tell me of a better.”

“I think I can tell you of as good a one, Mr. Fox,” said Tommy Smith, “because the hare did just the same sort of thing. He kept running underneath a gate, and letting the dogs jump over it, backwards and forwards; and then, when they were quite tired, he got away down a hedge.”

“Ha, ha!” laughed the fox. “That was not bad at all for a hare.”

“Oh, he is such a clever animal,” said Tommy Smith. “Once he got into a flock of sheep, so that the hounds could not get to him, because the sheep all huddled together.”

“Oh, I know that trick,” said the fox.

“And once,” continued Tommy Smith, “he doubled on the edge of the cliffs, and let the dogs jump over them into the sea.”

“I think I once did that too,” said the fox. “At any rate, I have jumped over a cliff on to a ledge, about ten feet down, which led into a cavern with an opening somewhere else, so that I got right away. I have done that often. The hounds didn’t jump over the cliff, it is true, but then we foxes don’t double. It

is a pretty trick if it answers, but rather dangerous. We foxes like to keep farther away from the hounds."

"But you know the hare doubles when he is in danger of being run down, Mr. Fox," said Tommy Smith.

"The hare knows what he is about," said the fox, "but if you think he is as cunning as I am, I can tell you something which will show you that you are wrong."

"Oh, do tell me, please, Mr. Fox," said Tommy Smith, but to himself he said, "Perhaps the hare could tell me something to prove it the other way".

"You have only to listen," said the fox. "Once—and it was not so long ago, too—I was out early in the morning, and very much wanted my breakfast—I had walked about a long time without being able to get it. At last as I was walking along, just inside a plantation, I saw some hares in the fields outside, and I made up my mind to breakfast on one of them. However, no fox can run so fast as a hare, and, of course, if I went into the open fields they would soon see me and be off. So what was I to do? Most animals would have given it up, but that would have meant that the hare was more-cunning

than me, for you see he had taken his precautions against me. Now if *I* could catch *him*, I should be the most cunning of the two, and I made up my mind that I would be. I knew that when the sun rose the hares would come into the plantation, and I walked along the hedge to find the hole in it that they would be most likely to come through—for of course you know that when animals come through a hedge, they——”

“Oh, yes, Mr. Fox, I know that,” said Tommy Smith. “They make a way, and always go through at the same place. They don’t go through anywhere, so as to have to make a way each time.”

“Of course not,” said the fox. “That would be taking unnecessary trouble ; but perhaps”—the fox looked very cunning as he said this—“it would be better for them sometimes if they did take it. However, you shall judge. When I had found out a nice hole that smelt strongly of hare—most appetising that was—I scraped the earth away on one side of it, just where it came out into the wood, and then lay down in the hollow I had made. I lay very close, you may be sure, with my ears down and my nose between my paws—like this—even though I was behind a hedge, and when I looked

through the hole, as I couldn't help doing every now and then, it was as cautiously as you can imagine—or perhaps a little more than you can, if the truth were known, for little boys are not very cunning. It was just the grey of the morning, but foxes, you know, are nocturnal, and I could see the hares quite distinctly. Oh, how nice they did look! There is nothing prettier, I think, than a hare to look at, and whenever they made some very graceful movement, the saliva would run down quite over my lips.”

“I know what you mean very well, Mr. Fox,” said Tommy Smith, “and I wish you wouldn't talk like that, because I like the hare.”

“Oh, so do I,” said the fox. “I like hare too. Well, I waited and waited, and at last the sun began to rise. Then, one after another, they came running back to the wood, and I saw three go into it, through holes in the hedge which were not very far off, but none had come yet through the one I was watching. At last two came straight towards it, one behind the other. As they got near I could hear them, oh, so plainly—it was very exciting—but I never raised my head, only cocked my ears a little, as I lay with it pressed flat down, and in the proper position to spring.

'Thump, thump,' and now they were on the other side of the hedge. 'Swish, sw——' Oh, what a spring I made!—it was worth all that waiting for—and the next moment I had the first hare by the neck, had broken it as quick as lightning, and was trotting off with him to my wife and family."

"You are a very cruel animal, Mr. Fox," said Tommy Smith.

"Why, he was dead in a moment," said the fox, "and knew nothing about it before it was all over. If hares were coursed by greyhounds in the same way, ladies who look on at it would be as humane as foxes—to one animal at any rate."

"Poor hare!" said Tommy Smith.

"And yet I don't know," the fox continued, "because you see when *I* kill a hare, it is to get a meal, and that makes it right, you know."

"I suppose it does, with an animal," said Tommy Smith.

"Exactly," said the fox; "but ladies don't tear animals to pieces because they are hungry, they would think *that* vulgar."

"It is the dogs that kill the hare," said Tommy Smith.

"And who is it that builds a house?" asked the fox.



"WHAT A SPRING I MADE"

"Oh, the architect," said Tommy Smith.

"No, the bricklayers," said the fox.

And Tommy Smith did not contradict the fox, because he understood what he meant.

"So now," the fox continued, "you see which is the most cunning of two very cunning animals—the fox and the hare. Both of them can get the better of men and dogs, in all sorts of cunning ways, but when it comes to a question of getting the better of each other, a fox can catch a hare and eat it, but nobody ever heard of a hare catching a fox and eating *him*. That proves it, you see, and now I will say good-morning."

"Oh, Mr. Fox," said Tommy Smith, "you said something about your wife and family. Are they anywhere near here?"

"Not so *very* far off," answered the fox, with a cunning look.

"Oh, Mr. Fox," said Tommy Smith again, "would you mind showing them to me? I mean your cubs, you know."

"You wouldn't steal one, of course," said the fox.

"Oh, no, Mr. Fox, I wouldn't really," Tommy Smith answered directly.

"Or tell some one else, who might," the fox went on.

"Oh, no, Mr. Fox, I *promise* not to," said Tommy Smith very earnestly.

"That's right," said the fox, "you have made me a promise, and I feel quite sure you will keep it."

"Oh, yes, indeed I will," said Tommy Smith.

"I feel sure of it," said the fox. "Do you know why?"

Tommy Smith thought he did know, but he did not want to seem conceited, so he only said, "Why, Mr. Fox?"

"Why, because I will help you," the fox answered. "To keep a promise without help is often a difficult thing to do. It would be very difficult, I am sure, for you to keep this one by yourself, but with *my* assistance it will be quite easy, because, you know, *I* am so cunning."

And with a grin that made Tommy Smith quite nervous—it showed his teeth so—the fox trotted off through the woods.

"Oh, dear," thought Tommy Smith to himself, as he walked home, for the disappointment made him forget all about the woodpeckers, "he was too cunning to show me where they were."

And that was the truth.

CHAPTER XI

THE CUCKOO

TOMMY SMITH was so disappointed when the fox trotted away without showing him his cubs, that he began his walk home in quite a discontented state of mind. "But for all that," he thought to himself, after a time, "it is not every boy of my age that has had a conversation with such a grand animal. The fox is a *very* grand animal, I think, to have had a conversation with."

"Cuckoo," said a voice just above him—he was not quite out of the wood yet—"if you would like to—cuckoo, cuckoo."

"Oh!" said Tommy Smith, looking up into the tree that the voice came from, "there is only one bird that——"

"Cuckoo," said the voice again, "if you would like to—cuckoo, cuckoo." And with this the cuckoo—for of course it was the cuckoo—flew out of the tree, and after circling round Tommy Smith's head two or three times

settled on another tree, just a few paces in front of him, and when he got to that one, flew into another, and then another, and so on from tree to tree, always keeping a little ahead, as if he was leading the way. And all the while it was "Cuckoo, if you would like to—cuckoo, cuckoo".

"Oh, Mr. Cuckoo," cried Tommy Smith at last, "why ever don't you finish the sentence?"

"If you knew how I try to," said the cuckoo, and then it was "cuckoo, cuckoo," again.

"I suppose you are so accustomed to saying 'cuckoo,'" Tommy Smith was beginning, "that——"

"That's it, of course," said the cuckoo—he was in the hedge that skirted the wood now, and Tommy Smith was sitting on the stile just beside him—"that's it, but I must make an effort. You see it's so difficult, and whenever I come to a word that ends in 'oo,' or that sounds like that—such as 'to,' 'do,' 'you,' 'knew'—it makes me want to say 'cuckoo'."

"I see," said Tommy Smith.

"It wouldn't be so bad if all the words were like that," the cuckoo went on, "but

there are such a lot of other ones, and if you don't use those, then what you say doesn't mean what you want it to. There never was such a language."

"But a language must have a lot of words, you know, Mr. Cuckoo," said Tommy Smith.

"I don't see why it must," said the cuckoo. "*I* prefer a language that has one principal word and just a few others to help it. That is much more convenient."

"But it wouldn't mean much, then," said Tommy Smith.

"Nonsense!" said the cuckoo. "Why, think how much you may mean when you say 'Oh!' or 'Ah!' or 'Dear me,' or 'Well, I never'."

"Oh, yes," said Tommy Smith, "but——"

"A word that can mean a lot of things must be better than a word that can only mean one thing," said the cuckoo, "just as a servant that can do a lot of things must be better than a servant that can only do one thing. You see that, I suppose."

Tommy Smith did not think the cuckoo was right, but what he said about the servants seemed sensible, so he felt obliged to say, "Oh, yes, Mr. Cuckoo".

"My language is on that principle," the cuckoo continued. "'Cuckoo' is my head

servant, and can do most things; but when some extra work is required, I have 'cack,' 'cack-a-cack,' 'cuc-kew-oop,' 'whush-a-whush,' and a few others with whose assistance everything can be managed. That is only reasonable, but when it comes to about a score of words to say something that one might just as well not have said at all—for instance, about what sort of day it is, which every one can see as well as you can—oh, there never was such a language!"

"But what would *you* say, Mr. Cuckoo?" said Tommy Smith.

"I?" said the cuckoo. "Why, I should just say 'cuckoo,' and whatever sort of a day it was, I would mean that, if I meant it to mean it, and all sorts of other things, if I meant it to mean them."

"But I wouldn't know which you did mean, Mr. Cuckoo," said Tommy Smith.

"You!" said the cuckoo. "Oh, you are only a little boy, and that is why I am talking to *you* in the only language you can understand. It is getting a little easier now, but at first I had to keep saying 'cuckoo' whatever I thought of, which shows that whatever can be said in your language can be said in mine too—or else, you know, how could I translate it?"

This was a question which puzzled Tommy Smith, and he was glad that the cuckoo did not wait for an answer to it, but went on, at once, with "Well, so I suppose you have been hearing some fine tales about us".

"I know that you cuckoos lay your eggs in other birds' nests, Mr. Cuckoo, if that is what you mean," said Tommy Smith.

"Yes, that's what I mean," said the cuckoo. "Of course we do, and a very clever plan it is, I think."

"The question is, is it right?" said Tommy Smith.

"The *answer* is—certainly," said the cuckoo, "and that's much more important, you know."

"But I'm not sure that it is right," said Tommy Smith.

"Why, you see," said the cuckoo, "it gets rid of two great bothers—making the nest and looking after the children. So if that does not prove it——"

"They oughtn't to be bothers," Tommy Smith was beginning.

"Oh, dear," said the cuckoo, "I'm sure I don't know what else they could be. Why, fancy having to put a lot of little bits of stick and grass and moss, and things of that sort,

together—and to keep on for hours every day; I'm sure *I* should find it very tiring. Wouldn't you?"

This was such an unexpected question that Tommy Smith could only stare for a minute or two; but at last he said, "Oh, but that's nothing, because I'm a boy, you know; and boys are not supposed to make birds' nests. But birds *are*, and other birds have told me that they like doing it."

"There's no accounting for tastes," said the cuckoo. "However, if they're so fond of it, they can make ours if they like, and then we should have one. As we give them our eggs, you know, that would only be fair."

"Fair, indeed!" said Tommy Smith. "Why——"

"However, if one comes to think of it, they do make our nest," said the cuckoo, "for of course a nest belongs to the bird that is able to stay there and turn any other bird out."

"Nonsense!" said Tommy Smith very decidedly. "It belongs to the bird that makes it."

"That *is* an idea!" said the cuckoo. "Why, who do your clothes belong to, then? No, no, the owner of a nest is the bird that can stay in it longest. Now, when a young cuckoo is

first hatched out of the egg, it finds itself with several other young birds—four or five sometimes—and the question is, which of them all the nest is going to belong to. But that is soon settled, for our baby goes to work like a true hero, and turns them all out, one after the other.”

“Oh, but how can he,” asked Tommy Smith, “when he is so young?”

“Ah, you may well ask,” said the cuckoo. “He is quite blind as well as quite naked, and yet he acts in that heroic way. A young cuckoo is a true hero.”

“I think it’s a horrid thing to do,” said Tommy Smith, “and if ever I were to see him——”

“Oh, dear,” said the cuckoo, “I hope you’re not going to be angry with a little blind baby. That *would* be ridiculous.”

Tommy Smith did not quite know what to say to this. After all, it did not seem as if a bird that was so very young could really be doing wrong, and besides he knew that in nature one animal is always being killed by another animal. “And as they can’t help it,” he thought to himself, “I suppose it’s right, really, even when it doesn’t seem to be.” So, as he could not contradict the cuckoo, he

thought the best way was to ask him another question. "Oh, Mr. Cuckoo," he said—and he really did want to know this—"how *does* the little cuckoo turn the other young birds out of the nest?"

"Why, really," answered the cuckoo, "it's such a long time ago, that *I* can hardly remember it, but it seems to me as if I got my tail—of course there were no feathers in it then, but I mean the part they grew out of afterwards—underneath first one and then another of those impertinent little wretches, and kept on hoisting them up against the side of the nest, until, at last, they fell over the edge of it. Yes, that was it, I feel sure. A feeling comes over me now, when I cast my mind back. Ah! it is sweet to recall one's childish impressions."

"Poor little things!" said Tommy Smith. It was only by remembering what he had just been thinking, that he prevented himself from being very angry with the cuckoo.

"Yes, poor little things," said the cuckoo, but he did not *look* sorry at all.

"I suppose they were starved, as they lay on the ground," said Tommy Smith, in quite a sad tone of voice.

"Yes, that was it," said the cuckoo, "if they

weren't eaten, that is to say. A weasel, you know, or a rat, may have come along."

Tommy Smith felt that he must say something now. "Of course, you could not *help* it, Mr. Cuckoo——" he was beginning.

"Not I," said the cuckoo.

"So that, perhaps, it was not your fault," Tommy Smith went on.

"Oh, no," said the cuckoo, "*that* was the age of innocence."

"But for all that," said Tommy Smith, "I think you might be sorry for the poor little birds now."

"Now?" said the cuckoo. "Oh, they're dead now."

"And then the poor mother and father bird," said Tommy Smith. "You didn't think about them."

"Think about them!" said the cuckoo. "Why, it was *their* business to think about me."

"You are a very hard-hearted bird, I think, Mr. Cuckoo," said Tommy Smith.

"As to that——" said the cuckoo.

But as he did not go on, but only said "Cuckoo, cuckoo," Tommy Smith did not quite know what he meant. "But it's no use

being angry with him," he thought to himself, "and, after all, he's made so."

"Well," said the cuckoo, "is there anything else you would like me to remember? It *is* so pleasant to look back, you know."

"Oh, yes," said Tommy Smith. "You might tell me how you were brought up, Mr. Cuckoo. I suppose the old birds did think about you."

"I should think so," said the cuckoo. "It would have been very wicked of them if they hadn't, for I was their foster-child, and the only one left, now, for them to look after. However, they did their duty, and fed me, all day long, with worms and caterpillars and things of that sort. They were a couple of hedge-sparrows, I *think*—but really, it is so long ago."

"But didn't you get too large for the nest, Mr. Cuckoo?" said Tommy Smith.

"Why, you see there were four young hedge-sparrows in it, if they hadn't made room for me," said the cuckoo, "and it took me some time to get as large as they would have been all together, if they had grown up in the nest. In time I did, and larger too perhaps, but still I was always able to sit in the nest although I quite filled it. Ah, it was fun, then, to see

my two servants coming, one after the other—and sometimes both together—like two little brown dwarfs, to feed me. They looked half frightened sometimes, and it did make me laugh. I was so big, and felt so hungry, that I could have eaten *them*, sometimes, if only they had been good to eat. But, of course, as they weren't, I didn't, and besides, I should have had no one to feed me then."

"It would have been very ungrateful of you if you had, Mr. Cuckoo," said Tommy Smith.

"It would have been very stupid—that's what *I* look at," said the cuckoo.

"But you know they were your foster-parents," said Tommy Smith.

"They wouldn't have been if I hadn't come and turned out the other ones," said the cuckoo. "They owed that honour entirely to me."

After this, Tommy Smith thought he would only ask the cuckoo about himself, as it seemed clear that he had no good feelings. "Wasn't it rather inconvenient being so large, Mr. Cuckoo?"—that was his next question—"and weren't you afraid of other animals seeing you?—rats, I mean, or weasels, or perhaps hawks or owls."

"Oh, I didn't think much of that," said

the cuckoo, "because when any one did see me I knew what to do. I would draw back my head till it was almost in the centre of my body, and then open my mouth wide—like this, you know—and hiss as loud as I could ; and then I would keep shooting my head forward, and drawing it back again, and hissing all the while, so that whoever saw me thought I was a snake, and felt quite frightened."

"Oh, Mr. Cuckoo," cried Tommy Smith, "what a wonderful colour your mouth is inside ! Why, it is almost vermilion, and how you do hiss ! Why, it really is like a snake."

"Yes," said the cuckoo, "that is my trick, you know, only I don't have to use it now. When anybody that wasn't wanted saw that flaming patch of colour, and heard such a loud hissing, they were frightened, and I really do believe they thought it was a snake with its mouth open—for their mouth is red inside too, or, at any rate, pink. At any rate they went away, and that was all I cared about. And now," continued the cuckoo, "I must go away too, only if you would *like* to walk back by the river——"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Cuckoo," said Tommy Smith, for the cuckoo had made a pause.

"Well, if you *would* like to," the cuckoo

continued, "we might find my wife there, for I know she went over to look for a reed-warbler's nest amongst the reed-beds. That's what I was trying to say, at first, you know, only I hadn't had any practice then, and the words kept changing into 'cuckoo'. Well, now, if you're ready." And off he flew.

Tommy Smith walked after him as quickly as he could—it was too far to run—and when he came to the river there were two cuckoos flying about the bank, from one reed-bed to another. "Here she is," said the one he had been speaking to, "and now you can ask her what *she* thinks about making a nest and looking after a family. Perhaps you mightn't believe me, you know, because *I'm* only a father."

"*I* am a mother," said the other cuckoo, "so of course I know what *I* am talking about."

"If you *are* a mother——" Tommy Smith was beginning.

"If!" said the mother cuckoo. "I suppose I ought to know."

"What I meant," Tommy Smith explained, "was that as you are a mother, I wonder you don't look after your little ones better."

"Better, indeed!" said the mother cuckoo

"Why, I'm trying to provide for one now, and what more a mother can do than provide for her children, I'm sure *I* don't know, though, perhaps, *you* may."

"Little boys know so much about subjects of that sort," said the father cuckoo; and then he cuckooed several times.

"Of course, if you really do look after them——" Tommy Smith was beginning.

"Oh, dear!" said the mother cuckoo. "If you knew the time that it takes me sometimes to find them a really good nest, and a properly trained pair of nurses. Why, here have I been the whole morning looking about for a reed-warbler's nest. That, on the whole, perhaps, is the very best that can be provided, and more attentive nurses it would be impossible to have. Up to the present my efforts have not been successful, but I am not easily discouraged, and I intend to go on until I find myself suited."

"She does not mind how much trouble she takes," said the father cuckoo.

"As to that," said the mother cuckoo, "with one's own child it is impossible to be too careful."

"But why don't you make a nest for them?" asked Tommy Smith.

"What! myself?" said the mother cuckoo. "That may suit some parents, but it is not quite my idea. *I* am a little more *exigeant*."

"We do not believe in mere amateur work," said the father cuckoo.

"Not even when it is our own," added the mother cuckoo. "No, no, I should be sorry to sacrifice my children to any vanity of that sort."

"Oh, but I thought——" began Tommy Smith.

"Of course, I don't *know* who made your cradle," the mother cuckoo continued, "so perhaps it *may* have been your mother."

"Oh, I don't think so," said Tommy Smith; and then he added more decidedly, "I suppose it must have come from somewhere."

"Exactly," said the mother cuckoo, "and when *I* require a nest for any child of mine, I employ the services of a professional nest-builder."

"But you don't *ask* a bird to build you one," said Tommy Smith.

"Good gracious!" said the mother cuckoo, "why, what would be the good of that? She would refuse, of course, and that would be distressing to both parties."

"It is best to avoid any unpleasantness," said the father cuckoo.

"My duty," said the mother cuckoo—and she pronounced the word in a very decided way—"is to find suitable nests for my children. When I have done so, and deposited each in its own, then my children are provided for, and I have done my duty by them as a mother. That, at least, is the view which *I* take, though, perhaps, *you*, as a little boy, may take another."

"She means to be sarcastic, you know," said the father cuckoo.

Tommy Smith did not quite know what being sarcastic was, but the mother cuckoo spoke in such a grand way that it made him feel quite uncomfortable, and he hardly felt able to say what he had meant to, when he began the conversation.

"The plan has several advantages," the mother cuckoo continued, after a slight pause. "For instance, it avoids overcrowding."

"I don't quite understand," said Tommy Smith.

"Exactly," said the mother cuckoo. "It is not *your* department. What I mean is, that by this arrangement each of our children has a nest to itself, whereas——"

"Because," broke in Tommy Smith—and again he felt very angry—"the other poor little children are thrown out."

"Just so," said the mother cuckoo. "It works out in that way."

"It's not a very *nice* way," said Tommy Smith.

"It is the *only* one," said the mother cuckoo, "so we have to conform to it."

"You mean——" Tommy Smith was beginning.

"One must take things as they are, you know, and make the best of them," said the mother cuckoo, "but, for my part, I think the plan a simple one."

"It is simplicity itself," said the father cuckoo.

"That is my view," said the mother cuckoo, "and I had no idea of complaining. Yes, they have each their own nest, but, of course, if I were the builder, I couldn't be expected to build one for every member of the family. That would be too hard work even for me."

"All the other birds make nests for their little ones," said Tommy Smith, "and they all have to live in the same one."

"That is what we try to avoid," said the mother cuckoo, "and hitherto, I think, we

have been successful. Have we not, my love?"

"Entirely," said the father cuckoo.

"If there is any further explanation I can afford——" said the mother cuckoo, as if she expected Tommy Smith to say something.

"I think it's very funny, Mrs. Cuckoo," said Tommy Smith, "if you really are so fond of your children, that you don't feed them yourself."

"Why, what would be the use of that, after they are provided for?" said the mother cuckoo; "you would not wish them to be *over-fed*, I suppose."

"There is no use in superfluity," said the father cuckoo.

"But you don't even see them," said Tommy Smith.

"See them!" cried the mother cuckoo—and her voice quite trembled. "Why, to do that I should have to break the egg, and when I think of what would happen if I did—— Oh, dear me, the very suggestion——"

"You shouldn't allude to such things," said the father cuckoo.

"But I didn't mean that at all," said Tommy Smith. "I only meant——"

"I can no longer support such a conversa-

tion," said the mother cuckoo. "Other birds, perhaps, may be better able to, but for a really sensitive parent——"

"You have very much upset her," said the father cuckoo.

"I didn't mean——" Tommy Smith was beginning again.

"See my children, indeed!" said the mother cuckoo, "and they in the egg at the time."

"But I meant afterwards," said Tommy Smith.

"Good-bye," said the mother cuckoo. "If *you* like to stay, my dear——"

But the father cuckoo was much too wise, so away they flew together.

"I suppose," thought Tommy Smith to himself, as he walked home by the river, "that if it is the custom for a bird never to see its children, and steal another bird's nest, and kill the young ones in it, then that custom seems right to that bird, and any other one seems wicked."

CHAPTER XII

THE WATER-VOLE

SO Tommy Smith walked back along the river, and as he went he said to himself, "The woodpeckers, the fox and the cuckoos—three conversations with three different animals in one day, and if I were to see something else on the way home that would be four".

"How do you know that?" said a little voice that sounded right underneath him, and looking down, what should he see but a water-rat sitting half way down the bank, on a little muddy projection.

"How do you know that?" said the water-rat again, as he peered up at Tommy Smith with his bright black intelligent eyes.

"Know what?" said Tommy Smith, for he forgot that he had been talking to himself.

"Why, that if you were to see another animal, that would be a fourth conversation," answered the water-rat, "because, you know

whatever animal it was might be too busy to talk to you."

"I hope you are not too busy, Mr. Water-rat," said Tommy Smith.

"I don't know about that," said the water-rat, "but if you call me a rat I shall be too angry."

"Oh, but I only said water-rat, you know," Tommy Smith explained, "so I don't think you ought to be; if I had said 'rat' without the 'water' that would have been different."

"If you had said 'water' without the 'rat,' *that* would have been different," the water-rat answered. "I should not have minded at all then."

"But you wouldn't have known what I meant," said Tommy Smith.

"Then, of course, I shouldn't have been angry," said the water-rat.

"But I don't think you ought to be angry anyhow," said Tommy Smith, "because you know you *are* a water-rat, Mr. Water-rat."

"How dare you say so?" said the water-rat, and he looked *most* indignant. "I am not—I am a water-vole."

"We are *both* water-voles," said another little voice—rather smothered at first—and there, all at once, was another little brown

patch of fur, with two more little bright black eyes, sitting on the mud, beside the first one. "We are *both* water-voles, and so are all our family, and it is *too* bad that people should always call us rats."

"Your family, Mrs. Water—rr—vole," cried Tommy Smith. "Oh, I should like to see some little water—rr—voles."

"I was speaking of the race to which we belong," said the mother water-vole (that is what we must call her now), "and not merely of my own offspring."

"Do you mean you have some young ones," Mrs. Water—rr—vole?" said Tommy Smith, for he had only paid attention to the last three words of the sentence.

"I wish you would say water-vole properly and not as if you wanted to call me a rat," said the mother water-vole. "As for my children they are much too young to leave the nursery, and even if I were to let you put your arm up the gallery which leads to it, you couldn't do it without falling into the river."

"I shouldn't like to do that," said Tommy Smith.

"Of course not," said the mother water-vole. "There is nothing more clumsy in the water than a little boy."

"Except a man," said the father water-vole.
"I don't know which is the worst."

"A dog is bad enough," said the mother water-vole, "but compared with them——"

"They are even said to drown, sometimes," said the father water-vole, "though that I have not seen."

"Nor I," said the mother water-vole. "It must look very curious."

"A most laughable sight, I should say," said the father water-vole, "though how it's done I don't pretend to understand."

"Men are so extremely silly," said the mother water-vole.

"Oh, it's all very well, Mrs. Water-vole," said Tommy Smith—he did not like the way they were talking at all—"but men are not so very silly, you know."

"On land it may be different," said the mother water-vole, "but there is no limit to human stupidity in the water."

"Except drowning, my dear," said the father water-vole. "That is a limit, you know."

Tommy Smith was very angry indeed by this time. "You can't expect a little boy," he said, "or *anybody*, to swim like a water animal, and I don't think it's at all nice to

make fun about drowning. It isn't funny at all, really."

"It seems so to us," said the father water-vole, "but then we don't understand it, you know."

"It isn't at all nice——" Tommy Smith began again.

"If it comes to that," said the mother water-vole, "it isn't at all nice to call people rats who are not rats."

"As you did," said the father water-vole.

"I only did because everybody does," said Tommy Smith.

"That is our grievance," said the mother water-vole. "You cannot expect us to like people who abuse us in that way."

"And who treat us as if we really were rats," said the father water-vole, "which of course is much worse."

"I don't know about that," said the mother water-vole. "When people try to interfere with me they are so clumsy that I can always get out of the way—even when they set dogs on me. But when somebody says 'There's a water-rat,' I can't help hearing it even though I try not to listen, and it makes me quiver all over."

"You can't expect us to like people under

such circumstances," said the father water-vole.

"*You* wouldn't like to be called a thief, would you?" said the mother water-vole, "and you know a rat is one."

Tommy Smith thought for a little, and then he said, "Of course it's very wrong of people to try and hurt you, Mrs. Water-vole, especially if you do no harm, but——"

"Harm!" cried both the water-voles together. "Why, we only eat reeds and rushes and weeds and things of that sort."

"We are vegetable feeders," said the father water-vole.

"And quite harmless animals," the mother water-vole added.

"But as to their calling you rats," Tommy Smith continued, "I don't see how you can wonder at that, because, you know, Mrs. Water-vole"—he spoke to her because she had said the most about it—"you really do look like one."

"Look like one!" cried the mother water-vole indignantly. "What, with a tail not nearly so long, and ever so much more elegant?"

"And with fur of a rich chestnut brown and ever so much softer and thicker?" added the father water-vole.

"With teeth like this?" said the mother water-vole, as she bared hers. They were of a fine light yellow colour, and Tommy Smith thought them very handsome.

"And no great ugly ears sticking out of our fur," said the father water-vole. "You can hardly see ours, you know."

"What we are really like," said the mother water-vole, "is the beaver, who is our near relative, and one of the cleverest animals in the world. He is a good deal larger than we are, and his tail is flatter. But that is all, and why people are always mistaking us for a rat, but never for a beaver, is more than *I* can understand."

Tommy Smith had read all about beavers, and he could not help thinking that to mistake a water-vole for one would be like mistaking a cat for a lion or tiger. But he did not say this, because he felt sure it would only make the water-voles more angry—for he was afraid he had made them angry already. The best thing was to try and put them in a good temper again—he did not suppose they were always cross—so what he *said* was, "I don't think you need mind so much what people call you, Mrs. Water-vole, because everybody thinks that you are a very pretty little animal".

"Do you think they do?" said the mother water-vole, looking very pleased. "However, that is not what I so much think about——"

"It is not what *I* think about at all," said the father water-vole, though he looked just as pleased, Tommy Smith thought, as his wife did. "There are higher considerations. You see——"

"You see," said the mother water-vole—she liked explaining things too—"the rat has a bad reputation, and so——"

"So we suffer for it," said the father water-vole. "He is a thief, you know, so when people see us, and put us down as rats, they think we are as bad as they are."

"Sometimes," said the mother water-vole, "they see a real rat eating a fish on the bank of a river, and then they think it is we who catch the fish, and eat them, and people who like catching fish themselves are very angry with us about it."

"But do real rats ever do that?" asked Tommy Smith, for he was very surprised at what the water-vole had said.

"Yes," said the father water-vole. "In summer they leave the houses, and come out into the country, and some of them come to the banks of rivers, and live there,

or in the water, just as if it was their own property."

"But how do they manage to catch fish?" said Tommy Smith.

"Oh, a rat can manage anything," answered the mother water-vole.

"I shouldn't have thought they were so clever," said Tommy Smith, "because, you see, *they* are not water-rats."

"Do you mean that *we are*?" said the mother water-vole, and she began to look angry again directly.

"Oh, no," said Tommy Smith, "I didn't mean that at all; but they are not *you*, you know."

"Us, indeed!" said the mother water-vole.

"Let us understand each other," said the father water-vole. "We are voles, and voles are not rats. But the rat, of course, *is* a rat, and so if you like to call *him* a water-rat, whilst he is in the water, it doesn't matter."

"As long as you don't call him a water-vole," said the mother water-vole.

"Oh, I think I'll go on calling him the rat," said Tommy Smith, "even when he *is* in the water—so as not to be confused between the two," he added.

The mother water-vole still did not look quite satisfied, but when her husband whis-

pered to her, "He means the two names, my dear," her countenance cleared up, and she was ready to go on with the conversation.

"But don't *you* catch fish, Mr. Water-vole?" was Tommy Smith's next question.

"No," answered the father water-vole very decidedly.

"Never," added the mother water-vole in the same tone of voice.

"That seems so funny," said Tommy Smith, "because if a land animal can catch fish in the water, surely a water animal" (he did not say "just like it" this time, but that is what he thought) "ought to be able to too."

"It would be funny, perhaps, if he wasn't," said the father water-vole, "but you see we are able to."

"We could catch fish if we wanted to," the mother water-vole explained, "but we don't want to, so we don't."

"Then you don't like them, Mrs. Water-vole?" said Tommy Smith.

"Of course we don't," said the mother water-vole, "and *we* don't like ducklings or young moorhens either."

"We are vegetarians," said the father water-vole, "as I told you before, and such strict ones that we don't even care about eggs."

"So you see our position," said the mother water-vole. "If some one should be taking a walk along the bank of the river, and should happen to meet a rat with a duckling or a fish in its mouth, or that was eating a moorhen's or wild-duck's egg, it would all be put down to us. Now don't you call that hard?"

"Yes, I do, Mrs. Water-vole," said Tommy Smith. "I think it is very hard indeed."

"And if we *do* make a little excursion on land, now and then," the mother water-vole continued, "of course we are looked upon as rats all the more, and so every hand is against us."

"Yes," said the father water-vole; "I remember once when I had gone into a garden not far from here, and was eating some nice French beans that I had climbed up to, a man with two dogs saw me, and called out 'rat, rat,' directly. Luckily the dogs didn't see me, and I managed to get back to the river again, but my feelings, under such treatment, I shall never forget."

"Oh, it's all very fine, Mr. Water-vole," said Tommy Smith, "but if you steal things from gardens, you're not a harmless animal, even though you may be only a vegetable feeder, and you can't wonder at dogs being set on you."

The father water-vole said something, but in rather a low tone of voice, so that all that Tommy Smith could hear distinctly were the words "very exceptional".

"If you mean that you don't do it often, Mr. Water-vole——" he said.

"That's what he means, of course," said the mother water-vole, "and besides, it was only just a bean or two. One mustn't be mean, you know, and, for my part, if any one was to want a few of my reeds here, I should not think of grudging it them."

"But are they yours, Mrs. Water-vole?" said Tommy Smith.

"They're my food at any rate," the mother water-vole answered, "so it comes to much the same thing."

"I don't know about that," said Tommy Smith.

"Then some of the nicest things that I know of," the mother water-vole continued, "are the green seeds of the water-lily. We value them very much, but still if you would care to try a few——"

"Oh, no, thank you, Mrs. Water-vole," Tommy Smith answered, "I don't think I should like them."

"If you did, I suppose you wouldn't mind

taking a few of them," said the mother water-vole.

"Oh, no," said Tommy Smith, "but then——"

"I thought not," said the mother water-vole. "Well, it was just the same with my husband. You see he *did* like French beans."

"Very much," said the father water-vole, "but dogs, and being called a rat, would spoil any dinner."

"I don't think either of us will ever go into a garden again," said the mother water-vole, "and that is almost the same as if we never had been."

"It was almost the same to me," said her husband, "for as I had only eaten a bean or two, and couldn't carry any back——"

"Well," said the mother water-vole, "there are three things for you to remember—first, that we are not rats; secondly, that we are strict vegetarians; and, thirdly, that we are quite harmless animals. And now perhaps you would like to ask us some questions; you have not asked many, you know."

"Oh, Mrs. Water-vole," cried Tommy Smith, "I *should* like to know something. How long can a water-rat stay under the water when it dives?" There was no answer, and then all at once Tommy Smith remembered, and said,



"Oh, I *am* so sorry. I meant to say a water-vole."

"We will try and answer your question," said the mother water-vole, speaking in a *very* offended tone of voice—icy, Tommy Smith would have called it, if he had been accustomed to use the word—"Now, if you're ready, my dear."

"Quite," said the father water-vole.

"You have only to stand there and wait for us to come up," said the mother water-vole—she had not changed her voice one bit. "Well, good-bye."

"*Good-bye*," said the father water-vole. There were two little jumps and two little splashes in the water, and both the water-voles were gone.

"Bravo!" said Tommy Smith, as they went down—for it was quite pretty to see. "I wish I had a watch," he thought, "to see how long they stay down. But I can tell by counting. Sixty, said slowly, makes a minute." So Tommy Smith counted, but long before he got to ten minutes, he had given it up, and was on his way home. "I don't believe they were down all the time," he said to himself, as he walked along the bank, "but they were offended because I forgot

about their not being rats, and so came up somewhere where I couldn't see them." And that was just what they had done.

Just as Tommy Smith was coming in at the garden gate, he saw a bird sitting in one of the trees of the shrubbery, that was just the bird he wanted to talk to. So although he was rather late for his tea, he stopped and said, "Oh, Mr. Starling, I do want you to tell me something. The woodpecker says——"

"I know what you mean," said the starling, "but I can't answer that now. I should be number thirteen if I did, you know, and there are not more than twelve in a book. If it ever gets to another book, I shall be quite ready for a conversation, and I can be number one then, if you like."

Tommy Smith was not quite so sure that *he* understood what the starling meant, but as he refused to have a conversation now, there was no use in asking him, and besides, he had flown away. So Tommy Smith ran in to tea.

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